

**An Exploration of Middle Management Leadership Response
within an Extreme Context**

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ABSTRACT

This research sought to examine the changes in leadership styles required by middle managers when facing an extreme context and adapting to an uncertain environment. Given that adaptation to the changes its environment is vital for a firm's performance (Birkenshaw, Zimmermann & Raisch, 2016), understanding how effective leaders change leadership styles in an extreme context is vital in the drive for successful adaptation. Within the framework of this research, the COVID-19 pandemic was defined as an extreme context that required an alternative approach to leadership.

Academic leadership literature has not sufficiently explored the leadership response required by management to lead within an extreme context. The study used the Complexity Theory Framework developed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) in an attempt to explore the ability of firms to behave as complex adaptive systems when facing dynamic and highly complex environments.

A qualitative, exploratory and interpretivist research approach supported by twelve semi-structured interviews explored middle managers' leadership responses within this particular extreme context. Key findings within the research project support the Complexity Leadership Theory, demonstrating that an intertwined leadership approach consisting of entrepreneurial, operational and enabling leadership could be used to adequately address the additional system complexity created when facing an extreme context. Additionally, the findings provide insight into leadership approach pivots from managers as they shift between more task-focused and people-focused leadership approaches, adjusting their methodology to their team members based on the context in which they were operating. The researcher makes recommendations that an additional layer of leadership approach considerations be added to the Complexity Leadership Framework when utilised by leaders facing an extreme context, that would provide a framework to help guide the required shift. This more contextualised leadership approach needs to acknowledge that leadership does not happen within a vacuum and that while managing complexity within a system, leaders are required to not only shift their thinking but simultaneously their approach.

The research was limited due to the subjective nature of the interviews. However, the findings make both a theoretic and a practical contribution to the topic, and offers a recommended addition to the Complexity Leadership Framework that will aid leaders in facing additional complexity within their environments.

KEYWORDS

Complexity Leadership Theory, middle management, extreme context, uncertainty, leadership response.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

Ryan Jans

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1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 Introduction

At the end of 2019 and into 2020, the world began to experience a global event that generated widespread panic, plunging many firms into instant crisis management mode, having a negative impact on the global financial markets and ultimately changing the operating environment on which firms had built their businesses almost instantly (FitzGerald, Singer & Smit, 2020). This global disruptor, now infamously known as the COVID-19 pandemic changed the world as we know it, forcing numerous firms into chaos as it imposed disruption to the operating environment of these firms and enforced adaptation within firms at a rate that firms had never experienced before (Jacobides & Reeves, 2020). Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron and Byrne (2007) postulated that disruptive events within a firm create highly uncertain, complex and emotional environments in which the firm is required to make sense of the new paradigm in which they operate. Within the context of the events following the COVID-19 pandemic, firms have been required to adapt following an extreme environmental and market shift in order to remain successful and operational within a complex operating environment (Carlsson-Szlezak, Reeves & Swartz, 2020).

Firms today must adequately address the required adaptation following this paradigm shift, while simultaneously balancing business requirements to continue operating (Jacobides & Reeves, 2020). This necessitates a leadership approach that can effectively address the requisite complexity within the environment, while concurrently adapting to the immediate context the firm finds itself facing in order to maintain the firm's competitive advantage (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

A sustained competitive advantage within complex environments relies on leadership's ability to continuously adapt, while at the same time creating an environment conducive to adaptation. The ability to manage organisations "for efficiency and results while incorporating new knowledge about how to lead for adaptability" (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, p. 11) will be vital in managing within a more complex environment. Additionally, as demonstrated by Buchanan and Moore (2016) and Jacobsson and Hallgren (2016), the traditional dualities of leadership (leaders versus followers and individual versus dispersed leadership) have been replaced with a collective approach that better captures the realities of leadership within extreme contexts (Buchanan & Hallgren, 2019).

Furthermore, Baran and Scott (2010) suggested that “leadership necessarily involves all members of the organisation with respect to their roles and the context in which they operate” (p. 65). Through the exploration of the middle management leadership response to extreme contexts, it may be possible to develop additional leadership support systems that make a meaningful contribution towards the successful leadership practices of middle managers facing complex, dynamic and uncertain environments and therefore assist firms in succeeding within an increasingly uncertain and highly complex world.

1.2 Description of the Problem

Organisations operating within the dynamic and uncertain circumstances presented by the current business environment, do so while additionally facing major industry, market and environmental unknowns (Taródy, 2016). Given the high levels of complexity and the ever-changing volatile, uncertain, complex and agile (VUCA) contexts (Arndt & Pierce, 2018; Schoemaker, Heaton & Teece, 2018) within which firms operate, it has become increasingly clear that appropriate leadership will be required to produce both the flexibility and adaptability needed within firms to navigate the ever changing and challenging circumstances faced within their environments.

The comprehensive system shock caused by the economic and social fallout following the global COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent ‘shelter in place’ directives issued by numerous governments globally resulted in the complete shutdown (or lockdown) of numerous countries around the world. This has had a negative impact on global financial markets and generated widespread panic across the globe, plunging many firms into instant crisis management mode (FitzGerald, Singer & Smit, 2020). In a world already dealing with increasing complexity across a variety of sectors and on multiple levels within various contexts, additional challenges require further leadership paradigm shifts and therefore a deeper understanding of leadership within dynamic environments (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

The complexity introduced into the system shifted firms’ operating environment, requiring a radical change in the way firms would continue to operate from that moment onwards. Tushman and Romanelli (1985) defined radical change as an immediate paradigm shift in a firm’s strategic and operational activities. These strategic and operational shifts have a direct impact on the way in which agents engage internally and externally within their firms and ultimately involves organisational, interactional and leadership changes (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Balogun, 2019).

The impetus for the urgent shift within firms' strategic and operational environments arrived almost instantly and without warning, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has decisively challenged each business to rapidly implement both strategic and operational shifts in order to adapt. When it comes to the shift of a firm's strategy however, Bucy, Dickson, Hall and Yakola (2017, p. 1) emphasised that an "organisation wide and completely holistic" approach is required and that a focus solely on the top-down approach regarding the implementation of a required change will result in failure.

Middle managers play a key functional role within the everyday operations of a firm and are responsible for the communication and coordination of strategic and operational objectives throughout the firm (Tinline & Cooper, 2016). Randhawa, Wilden and West (2019) postulated that middle managers are essentially boundary-spanning actors operating at the intersection of both the firm's strategy, driven predominantly from the executive actors within the firm in a 'top-down' approach, and the firm's operational activities necessary to action the required strategy on a daily basis in a 'bottom-up' approach. This role at the intersection of the two focal points within a firm allows middle managers to sense the needed actions based on environmental feedback received and respond accordingly, while simultaneously remaining aligned to the overall mandated strategic direction, facilitating firm learning, development and adaptation as required (Wilden, Devinney & Dowling, 2016). Given the critical role middle managers play in successful implementation of strategic change within a firm (Giauque, 2015) and the demonstrated value of middle managers within the operational implementation of change within a firm (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008), an exploration of middle management leadership response is required in order to further examine the required leadership paradigm shift necessary in order to assist firms in successfully managing within extreme contexts in future.

In order to adequately manage the challenges faced by various firms during the mandated lockdown and the subsequent strategic and operational shifts required by firms in the aftermath of the pandemic, firm adaptation is key. As posited by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), the responsibility to drive adaptation within firms falls to firm leadership. This research project explores the middle management leadership response essential when facing the extreme context created by the COVID-19 pandemic through a complexity leadership lens. Ultimately, an updated leadership approach is essential to help organisations manage this rapidly evolving environment. This will help leaders face the expanding complexity and uncertainty in the global environment and aid research in the further development of leadership theory within the context of an extreme event.

1.3 The Rationale for this Research

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) suggested that leaders facing complexity make use of complexity to triumph. Furthermore, they suggested that firms need to move away from the 'order' response that calls for greater control and accountability and towards a more adaptive response that engages in and creates the necessary environment required for emergence (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Emergence, as defined by Uhl-Bien & Arena (2016) is the creation of something that did not previously exist prior to the combination of agents, systems and environments poised for change (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016). Within the boundary of this study, emergence is the creation of something that did not exist before the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), emergence, created through Enabling leadership, creates and holds the gap between Entrepreneurial and Operational leadership (Figure 1). By leading for emergence within the lockdown and post-lockdown environment, leaders will be required to shift their leadership style between entrepreneurial, enabling and operational thinking, providing the firm the ability to be as adaptive as necessary and ultimately creating an additional view of complexity leadership while operating within an extreme context.

This study answers the call for additional research into complexity leadership, particularly within dynamic contexts (Eisenhardt, Furr & Bingham, 2010; Worley & Lawler, 2010; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Furthermore, the study attempts to understand the various leadership styles required pre-event, during and post-event (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta, 2009) in order to understand the required shifting of leadership styles within different contexts. Finally, the study takes an in-depth look at middle management experiences, feelings and stories, and the behavioural nuances required within the leadership response to an extreme event. Through the exploration of the various phenomena within an extreme context and the leadership insights gathered, this study attempts to provide new insights within complexity leadership and present the complexity leadership approach in a new light.

1.4 Research Problem

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) postulated that the rate at which complexity is increasing in the world is perhaps the most paramount challenge leaders face today. Furthermore, Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) emphasised that continuously increasing complexity within the business environment has destroyed the basis of what we know about leadership to date, requiring a paradigm shift within leadership theory itself. Essentially, these seminal authors have called for further exploration into leadership within complexity. Additionally,

Heyden, Sidhu, and Volberd (2018) have called for additional investigation into the influence middle managers can assert on organisational effectiveness while Heyden, Fourné, Werkman and Ansari (2017) have recognised that a exploration into the impact of the leadership roles middle managers can have within the context of organisational uncertainty is necessary.

Based on the above assertions and given the global experience of firms in the context of the pandemic, the uncertainty and complexity created by a paradigm shift in the market and the response necessary to maintain a sustainable and successful business requires further exploration. Moreover, specific focus on the leadership response needed by middle management amid such challenges remains key in order to understand how to better approach leadership within extreme contexts. Further calls for exploration into the specific leadership styles required to manage the implementation of both strategic and operational shifts within firms prior, during and after an extreme context will add supplementary information to a growing leadership literature base while simultaneously aiding businesses in their approach to leadership within complex environments (Hannah et al., 2009). Finally, given the growing complexity within the operating environment, an exploration of how leaders process and make sense of complexity within an extreme context will provide useful information in the attempt to further understand the management of complexity by leadership (Mumford et al., 2007).

1.5 Research Contribution

Further exploration within the leadership field surrounding complexity management is required as evidenced by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017). Likewise, as evidenced by Heyden et al. (2017) and Heyden et al. (2018), additional exploration surrounding the impact of middle managers on the implementation of organisational change is required. Limited research exists across both of these areas and as such, this research addresses the existing gap in the literature by exploring the intersection of the leadership response required by middle managers within an extreme context.

This study aims to make a theoretical contribution by providing additional insight into the literature on leadership complexity theory, exploring the lived experiences of middle managers within a specific and challenging context. Additionally, this research project will attempt to make a practical business contribution through highlighting the leadership role of middle managers and the additional support they may require to successfully

balance both the operational and strategic requirements of their roles while enacting, supporting and leading during challenging periods.

1.6 Conclusion

This research project provides insight into the leadership response of middle managers during some of the most uncertain and trying times of their careers (FitzGerald et al., 2020) as they assist their businesses, their teams and themselves in attempting to remain focussed on driving future success while simultaneously attempting to deal with the unprecedented disruption, complexity and uncertainty caused by a collection of extreme events.

This research project is constructed as follows:

- Chapter 1: An introduction to the research problem.
- Chapter 2: Existing literature to date as it relates to complexity leadership, middle management and an extreme context.
- Chapter 3: Research questions forming the basis of this study.
- Chapter 4: Research methodology and overview of the research project.
- Chapter 5: Research interview results.
- Chapter 6: Results analysis and further discussion.
- Chapter 7: Study conclusion and future recommendations.

As highlighted above, complexity and therefore leadership adaptability while facing increasing complexity both now and into the future will be a key focal area for firms and leaders going forward (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Amidst a volatile, uncertain and rapidly changing environment, leaders will be required to pivot their strategic thinking and operational behaviour in order to adapt to this constantly changing environment. These changes require implementation from both a top-down and bottom-up approach across the firm. In order to attain success, the firm will require leaders who have the necessary competencies to both facilitate and manage within this complex environment and the necessary change.

2 CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The strategic management of a firm by its leadership is an attempt to assist the firm in achieving the adaptation required to maintain a competitive advantage (Bogers, Chesbrough, Heaton and Teece, 2019). Leaders need to adequately address the required adaptation while simultaneously balancing the business requirements for continued operation. This necessitates a leadership approach that can effectively address the requisite complexity within the environment while concurrently adapting to the context the firm faces in order to maintain the firm's competitive advantage (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Birkenshaw, Zimmermann and Raisch (2016) postulated that most firms fail to adapt to their changing environment, negatively impacting these firms and their performance within a market. This position is further supported by academics, executives and consultants who continue to focus prominently on the successful implementation of strategic and operational shifts that essentially fail at the executional phase (Chetty, 2010; Kaplan & Norton, 2008; Mohabir, 2008). In fact, Franken, Edwards and Lambert (2009) have suggested that up to 70 percent of developed and approved strategy fails to be executed effectively, and around only 60 percent of the promised value of executing a strategy effectively is ever realised. Ultimately it is the responsibility of a firm's leadership to drive adaptation within the firm (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) and simultaneously to ensure that the required changes necessary to benefit from the adaptation are successfully implemented.

The initial focus of this literature review is on two key constructs: Complexity Leadership Theory and extreme contexts. The literature review defines and elaborates on both Complexity Leadership Theory and extreme contexts, and links the required Complexity Leadership Theory behaviours necessary for leadership to manage successfully within extreme contexts. Additionally, this literature review further elaborates on the middle managers and their impact on the businesses in which they operate, and provides justification for their selection with this research project. The central focus of this section is to contextualise both Complexity Leadership Theory and extreme contexts and the impact one construct (Complexity Leadership Theory) can have on managing the other construct (extreme contexts), from a middle manager's perspective.

2.2 Complexity Theory

Complexity Theory and the understanding of complex adaptive systems (the unit of analysis within Complexity Theory) aims to explain the non-linear relationships that exist within complex systems and ultimately how the interconnectivity within a complex system produces unexpected and irreversible change between actors within the system (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). While complicated systems have numerous parts that can interact, that interaction ultimately does not cause change to other parts of the system (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Within complex systems however, the interaction of the various parts of the system will have an effect on other parts of the system. These interactions within the networked system create unexpected outcomes or emergence (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Emergence in simple terms is the development of something that did not previously exist prior to the combination of agents, systems and environments poised for change (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

Mumford et al. (2007) postulated that disruptive events within a firm create highly uncertain, complex and emotional environments in which the firm is required to make sense of the new paradigm in which they operate. The pandemic itself can be viewed as a complexity emergence event based on the definition from Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) in which numerous elements aligning within a connected system produce an outcome that was largely unpredictable and had far-reaching effects. Once the system had been impacted, as in the case of the global pandemic, there was no return to the way things were prior to the market shift. Ultimately, a new reality existed for firms, requiring firms to operate within a complex and uncertain environment.

The understanding and further exploration of complex adaptive systems and the existing complexity within these systems will provide leaders facing complex environments with a better understanding of the impact of their decisions across the networked, interconnected system in which they operate. It will allow leaders facing short-term efficiency requirements to adequately balance their focus and make better decisions.

2.2.1 Complex Adaptive Systems

According to Lichtenstein & Plowman (2009) complex adaptive systems are evolving systems capable of adaptation within a changing environment; they remain dynamic to the various forces acting upon them and ultimately are free of centralised control. With no fixed order, these systems are continually adapting to the environmental forces in which they operate, and self-organising as required. Essentially, complex adaptive

systems are an interconnected network of interactions consisting of a collection of agents all acting in parallel, generating highly adaptive behaviour (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

2.2.2 Firm Complexity Response

While complex adaptive systems allow for the continuous adaptation required from firms within a dynamic environment, the ability for firms to behave free from organisational systems and respond to complexity in a way that favours adaptability over stability and control is often avoided as firms pursue the ability to control the system in times of complexity (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Firms ultimately require hierarchy, control, reporting lines and management approaches, hence organisational systems and structures exist in order to maintain control, focus and stability. Leaders facing the growing complexity within their markets need to be able to adapt and change in parallel to the changing environmental context, however, this leadership response, based on existing literature, seems to be grounded in two response approaches:

The Order Response:

The order response is often a historically measured approach to facing complexity within a system by a firm which has previously responded to a change in their strategic, operational or environmental context and, when faced with a similar challenge, returns to the same ordered response to the threat with a 'top-down' approach. Literature demonstrates that when confronted by complexity within a system, firms often attempt to react as they did in the past, seeking greater accountability, additional efficiency and additional risk mitigation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) in an attempt to gain control of the system and the environment.

Additionally, leadership within an ordered response looks to mirror the requirements of the firm, seeking greater control, further regulatory responses and immediate decision making (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). This reaction however, while standard, seems to constrict the ability of a firm and its leadership to behave adaptably, repressing the firm's ability to respond effectively to the complexity (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

The Adaptive Response:

A firm's adaptive response to a complex challenge is one in which actors within the firm are empowered to "resonate around a new approach, alternative way of thinking, or adaptive solution" when facing complex challenges (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, p. 11).

An adaptive response seeks to utilise the collective intelligence of networked groups in order to enable firm adaptability to challenges, moving away from a top-down leadership approach and towards leadership focussed on the creation of an environment enabling emergence. The adaptive response from a firm seeks to create an environment in which leadership can emerge from actors, conditions or the environment, and ultimately operate successfully within the complex adaptive system (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

2.3 Complexity Leadership Theory

Proposed by Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007), Complexity Leadership Theory focuses on the enabling behaviour required by leadership to drive organisational effectiveness and ultimately aid a firm in learning, creating and adapting within a complex adaptive system. Complexity Leadership Theory seeks to aid firms in the managing of complexity within a system and intends to create, through emergence, a leadership response that delivers adaptive space. According to Arena (2018), adaptive space is a condition that enables networked interactions through the removal of bureaucracy, the opening up of formal and informal information flow channels, and the acceptance that adaptability lies within the interconnectivity of a networked system and the agents operating within that system. Its focus is to establish recognition patterns within strategies and behaviours that drive innovation, creativity and adaptability within individuals (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Furthermore, Complexity Leadership Theory focuses on creating the conditions within a firm that enable effective, adaptive states that empower the firm collectively to learn and adapt (Lichtenstein, Uhl-Bien, Marion, Seers, Orton & Schreiber, 2006). Based on several concepts defined by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), Complexity Leadership Theory is grounded in the following core concepts:

- Complexity Leadership Theory dictates that firm behaviour will be dependent and individual to each firm. The reaction of each firm to the complexity to which it responds will be largely defined by the specific context in which the firm operates and how the firm reacts to change.
- Complexity Leadership Theory differentiates between leadership and leaders, describing leadership (behaviour) as the enablement of adaptive change through dynamic interaction, while leaders (individual) remain the individuals that influence the required change through their actions.

- Complexity Leadership Theory further differentiates leadership and management, comparing leadership to an ongoing process that happens within and throughout the firm as opposed to specific management actions and interactions alone.
- Complexity Leadership Theory additionally differentiates the solving of technical challenges that require the use of existing knowledge against the required learning, innovation and adaptable behaviour required to address complexity and therefore requiring an adaptable response.

Ultimately, Complexity Leadership Theory recognises that firms are complex adaptive systems that necessitate a specific leadership response in order to successfully generate and deliver adaptive change. Furthermore, Complexity Leadership Theory provides a framework through which a variety of different leadership styles (entrepreneurial, operational and enabling leadership) can be utilised within the firm's complex adaptive system to successfully manage the complexity within the system and enable the required leadership response to drive adaptive change (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016).

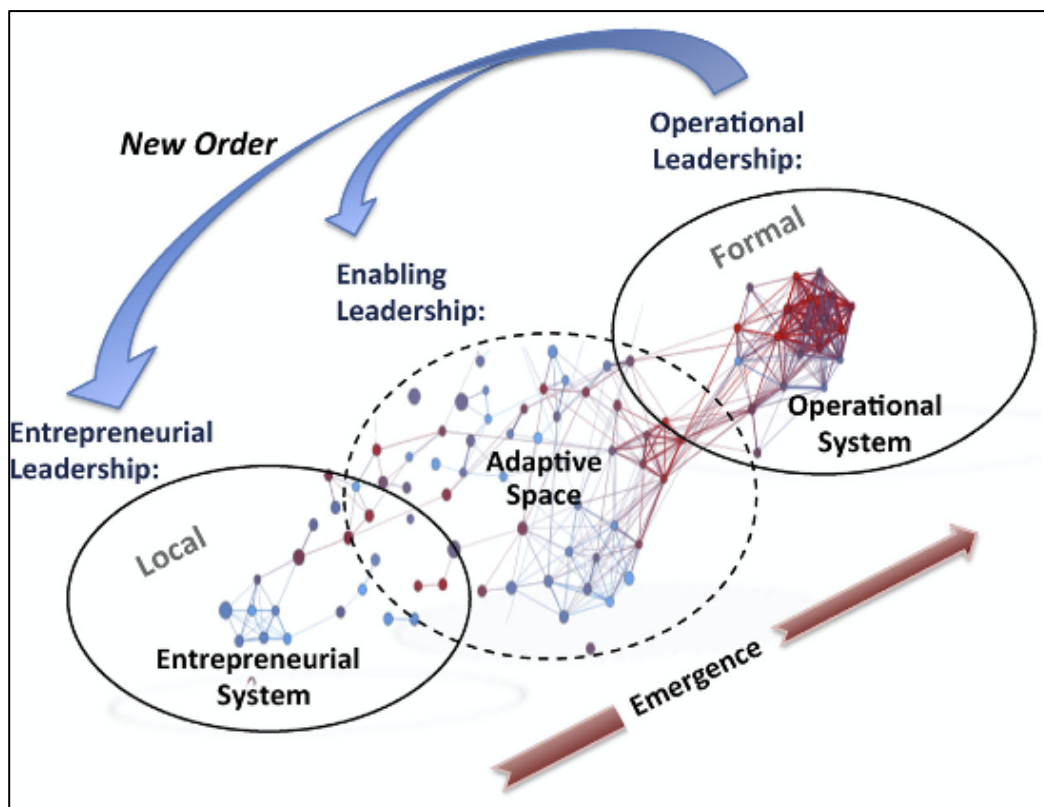


Figure 1: The Complexity Leadership Model
Source: Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017)

2.3.1 Complexity Leadership Styles

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) focused specifically on three key leadership styles that enable and protect the required adaptive space necessary for successfully adaptive change: entrepreneurial, operational and enabling leadership. The complexity leadership framework developed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) specifically focuses on the intertwined usage of various leadership styles within complex adaptive systems in order to enable firms to be as effective as possible while addressing their relevant environmental complexity.

Anderson (1999) stated that every exchange between agents within a complex system creates an informational exchange that ultimately promotes learning, sharing and adaptation. Furthermore, Anderson (1999) postulated that it is within these interactions that a dynamic system moves forward as the agents learn and adapt their approaches within the system and adjust their responses as required (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). It is this adaptation, often expressed as innovation, that contributes to the emergence of adaptive states within the complex and connected system itself (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007).

Agents within a system interact and influence each other and, iteratively, a common understanding emerges through this influence (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). Leadership within this system remains a shared and emergent process in which interaction and learning promotes adaptation within the complex system (Mendes, Gomes, Marques-Quinteiro, Lind and Curral (2016). The aim of leadership within this system is to create an environment that enables and promotes this emergence. The key leadership styles identified by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), which enable and protect the required adaptive space necessary to foster emergence, are discussed below.

2.3.2 Entrepreneurial Leadership

Entrepreneurial leadership is focused on the ability of an organisation to exploit an opportunity (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), requiring new ideas, new products, new skills and new processes to drive firm competitiveness, growth and success. Essentially, entrepreneurial leadership enables the development and delivery of new ideas and growth within a firm (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

This action-orientated leadership style attempts to solve problems through group engagement. Through the development of and engagement with cohesive groups, entrepreneurial leaders attempt to implement new ideas based on the limited resources they have available. Often both patient and persistent, entrepreneurial leaders demonstrate the flexibility and tenacity required to continue to push the system towards adaptation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016).

2.3.3 Operational Leadership

Operational leadership is focused on the more traditional leadership method with a specific focus on a leader and their actions in a top-down approach. Contextually, operational (or administrative) leadership exercises authority within the scope of adaptive leadership in an attempt to drive creativity, learning and adaptation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Essentially, operational leadership is the conversion of an idea into practice through the utilisation of the systems and processes required to bring an idea into practice (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016), operational leaders are focused on converting ideas into systems and structures. Through behavioural traits that include sponsoring, aligning and executing, operational leaders enable ideas to take shape. Sponsoring can be demonstrated through the consolidation of ideas from within the adaptive space and placing the ideas within systems and processes. Aligning involves operational leaders searching for the correct resources required to bring an idea to life. Executing is the energy and enthusiasm that operational leaders bring to ideas in order to get a firm to act on them.

2.3.4 Enabling Leadership

Enabling leadership is focussed on the creation, maintenance and sustainability of the adaptive space produced at the intersection and overlap of the entrepreneurial and operational leadership styles (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). This unique leadership style, introduced within the Complexity Leadership Theory framework, enables firms to be adaptive and agile in the face of complexity (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016). Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) further explained that through the creation and support of firm structures and systems that look to support and intensify emergence, enabling leadership will deliver the required firm adaptation required to sustain the necessary competitive advantage.

Complexity leadership requires that firms be able to transition between these three different leadership styles in order to adapt successfully, thus creating and maintaining the required adaptive space necessary for their firms to thrive. “Highly agile complexity leaders would be able to transition between entrepreneurial, enabling and operational thinking to introduce, adapt and advance novel ideas into the system in the form of new, adaptive order” (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, p. 14). However, as further postulated by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), it is highly unlikely that a single individual would possess the ability to engage in all three leadership styles and in fact this is not a requirement. What is necessary, however, is that a firm possess a broad array of leaders capable of tapping into the various styles in order to best position a firm to manage complexity and achieve firm adaptive ability.

As further proposed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), enabling leadership drives innovation and change by way of the support it provides it, enabling the creation of the adaptive space that fuels adaptive response in a system. Essentially, enabling leadership attempts to consolidate the collective intelligence within a firm through the leverage of network structures and complexity dynamics in order to answer the complexity pressures experienced by the firm. Enabling leaders are required to be able to identify emergence within a system and engage with it, either by energising the forces driving the emergence or by attempting to suppress them.

2.4 Creating Adaptive Space

As proposed by Uhl-Bien and Marion (2009), complexity leadership theory suggests that the daily interactions of agents within the system and their response to the pressures and opportunities within their specific context is what enhances a firm’s performance and its ability to adapt. It is within these interactions, created by the linking of two agents, that emergence is produced within the system (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Complexity Leadership Theory therefore requires leaders within this system and in pursuit of this emergence, to create the required conditions that enable firm adaptation.

Arena (2018) has established that an adaptive response from a firm requires the leaders of that firm to engage with and further support the tension created in the space between the firm’s two different systems, operational (systems, processes, administration) and entrepreneurial (new ideas, competitiveness, growth), known as adaptive space. This space, according to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) is essential to ensuring firms remain adaptive and competitive within a complex operating environment. With that in mind, the

role of leaders within these firms is to create the required adaptive space necessary to promote emergence within the firm and ensure the firm adapts as required to the complexity it faces.

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2019) propose four leadership focal points that leaders can use to frame their thinking around the creation and maintenance of the adaptive space in order to better enable their firms to adapt:

2.4.1 Development

Leaders are required to focus on the development of highly cohesive groups through the building of trust-based relationships across their firms. This focus on creating a strong and interlinked network throughout the firm, built on trust, will encourage the sharing of information and ideas, allowing these ideas to evolve and grow as required and promoting firm adaptation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016; 2019).

2.4.2 Discovery

Leaders are required to engage outside of their networks in an attempt to bridge connections between networks. Additionally, leaders should also be encouraging their teams to do the same. This discovery approach, assisted through an empowerment focussed leadership, allows networks to expand, providing leaders and their teams access to new or additional information that otherwise was not available to them (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016; 2019).

2.4.3 Diffusion

Leaders are required to utilise their own position and their networks in the capacity as a broker of adaptation to push the ideas created within the adaptive space they have created out into the firm. This requires energy from a leader in an attempt to amplify and ultimately scale an idea across their broader network (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016; 2019).

2.4.4 Disruption

Leaders are required to empower their teams to push boundaries and break down the administrative challenges, system barriers and process blockages that constraint and diminish adaptive space. It is through the disruptive behaviour of the leader in holding the adaptive space that the agents within the system are able to gain the traction they require to drive firm adaptation forward (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016; 2019).

Through the management of the tension that exists between the two identified systems within a firm, leaders have the ability to drive innovation and adaptation through their own individual leadership response and the response they encourage across their teams when facing complexity, essentially unlocking the potential within their teams to thrive in highly complex environments.

2.5 Extreme Context

As described by Osborn, Hunt and Jauch (2002), “leadership and its effectiveness, in large part, are dependent upon context. Change the context and the leadership changes.” (p. 797). Hannah et al. (2009), however, have stated that leadership in extreme contexts “may be one of the least researched areas in the leadership field” (p. 897). While extreme contexts are rare in organisations, Sorokin (1943) has demonstrated that when facing an extreme context, members of a group can become so overly stimulated and emotional that their ability to process information and make the correct decisions were negatively impacted. With this in mind and supported by numerous calls for additional focus on the contextualisation of leadership research (Avolio, 2007; Boal & Hooijberg, 2000), additional insight has been gathered with a specific focus on the leadership response when facing extreme contexts. Hannah et al. (2009) defined an extreme context as:

“...an environment where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organisations capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to or in close physical or psycho-social proximity to – organisation members” (p. 898).

In further understanding the potential consequences of these threats, the literature states that physical threats include death, injury or exhaustion; psychological threats include post-traumatic stress or shell shock; and material threats include loss or damage to property (Geier, 2016). Hannah et al. (2009) outlines a single extreme event as an event through which physical, psychological or material consequences occur within close proximity to organisation members of which the consequences are considered extensive and ultimately the capacity of the organisation to prevent this event is limited (Hannah et al., 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic, within the context of this research project, has been defined as an extreme context. It arrived without warning and fundamentally shifted the operating environment across the world, generating widespread panic which has resulted in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological and material consequences for firms (FitzGerald et al., 2020).

2.5.1 Organisational Response: Extreme Context

Given the nature of extreme contexts, many organisations may suffer from a lack of preparation, understanding, training or resources in order to adequately respond to an extreme context, thereby intensifying their experiences of the event or context itself (Geier, 2016). Given the multi-layer and generative nature of extreme contexts, it has been postulated by Buchanan & Hallgren (2019) that the level of experience of extreme events will be governed by a firm's capabilities and their ability to respond to the event or context. With that in mind, Hannah et al. (2009) have provided a framework of attenuators and intensifiers of the extremity of an event that could potentially increase or decrease the level of extremeness experienced by the firm.

2.5.1.1 Extreme Context Attenuators

Hannah et al. (2009) have proposed organisational, social and psychological factors as key attenuators within an extreme context and further suggest that these attenuators will support the firm when facing extreme contexts. Organisational resources such as technical, financial or human resources can provide additional support to an organisation's ability to limit the magnitude of the physical, psychological or material consequences a firm faces within an extreme context (Geier, 2016). Social resources including the ability of the firm to network, boundary span, exchange information and coordinate will decrease the negative effects experienced within an extreme context (Hannah et al., 2009). Psychological resources such as staff efficacy and employee resilience will aid in the support of the firm throughout the extreme context, ensuring staff within the firm remain performing at the best of their ability and adaptable as required (Buchanan & Hallgren, 2019).

2.5.1.2 Extreme Context Intensifiers

Geier (2016) postulated that time, event duration, event frequency and the level of complexity of the extreme context will serve as the key intensifiers. Time can limit the potential reaction of a firm, their ability to make decisions and ultimately limit a firm's ability to respond to the environmental context.

Additionally, duration of the extreme context as well as the frequency impact both the ability of the firm to learn, respond and adapt as well as the overall intensity of the experience within the extreme context. Furthermore, given the interconnected and independent variables within a complex, highly dynamic environment, complexity within a system adds additional intensity to an extreme context, creating unpredictable outcomes as factors interact.

2.5.2 Extreme Context Dimensions

As postulated by Hannah et al. (2009), the level of extremeness experienced by a firm within an extreme context will be largely dependent on the below highlighted key contextual dimensions, impacting the way in which a firm experiences and responds to the extreme context. The following summary provides some context surrounding the various dimensions of an extreme context and further demonstrates the many forms in which an extreme context could occur:

- **Location in Time:** As the level of threat within the environment changes, so will the experience of the extremity of that event (Geier, 2016). Distinct periods within the context of the firm's experience will emerge as it becomes clear that a period existed pre, during and post the extreme context. Leonard and Howitt (2007) postulated that effective leadership throughout an extreme context will vary during these distinctive phases and that furthermore, leadership will be required to assist in the transition from one phase or experience to the next. This leadership will be required to focus on the rebalancing of the firm from the emotional, cognitive and physical perspectives (Geier, 2016).
- **Probability and Magnitude of Consequences:** As the probability of an extreme context appearing increases and the magnitude of the consequences become evident, the extremity of the context may begin to affect the firm and its members in many ways (Hannah et al., 2009). Terror, stress and other emotive responses to extreme contexts can lead to a multitude of leadership challenges within a firm and add further complexity to the environment. In addition, it adds complexity to the leadership response required to successfully manage a firm within an extreme context.
- **Proximity:** Proximity to the extreme context plays an important role in the experience of the context for the firm as well as its leadership. Proximity can be physical,

psychological or social as well as the proximity or distance between the leader and follower when facing these extreme conditions (Buchanan & Hallgren, 2019).

- **Form of Threat:** Based on the physical, psychological or material threat posed by the extreme event or context, the required reaction will differ and will be further influenced by a broad range of individual, group and firm differences (Geier, 2016). Importantly, Geier (2016) further stated that the forms of threats can be combined, adding additional complexity to an already challenging environment. With this in mind, it becomes clear that leaders will face a multi-level, dynamic environment in which they will be required to adapt as necessary based on the form of the threat.

2.5.3 Extreme Context Leadership Response

Hannah et al. (2009) highlighted that organisational systems and processes within extreme contexts can be stretched to capacity, challenging leadership roles and responsibilities and negatively impacting the firm. Further highlighted by Geier (2016) is the requirement for leaders within extreme contexts to manage the flexibility required by teams to successfully navigate and respond to the environmental challenges, while simultaneously ensuring that the controls necessary for the successful coordination of action exist. Given the dynamic environments created within extreme contexts and thus the need for leadership adaptability, adaptive tension and therefore adaptive leadership remains key to achieving success.

2.6 Middle Management

The literature review has established, based on the work presented by Lichtenstein & Plowman (2009), Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016, 2017, 2018) and Arena (2018) that the world in which firms now operate is one that faces increasing complexity and ultimately requires the firm's operating within the environment to adapt accordingly. This assists in the understanding of why firms need to adapt. Additionally, the literature has been used to establish the requirement for leadership to take control of the necessary adaptation within a firm based on leadership's control of the strategic and operational direction of the firm (Faulkner & Campbell, 2003). This provides us insight into who within the firm needs to take responsibility for adaptation. Furthermore, we've established the key role context plays in terms of leadership and need for leaders to adapt their leadership focus based on the context in which they operate (Osborn, Hunt and Jauch, 2002). This provides an understanding of when firms need adaptation.

The following section focuses on the firm itself and ultimately how, at an implementation level, a firm can drive the necessary adaptation and behaviour required to move from a strategic idea into an actionable behaviour. Kanter (1983) explicitly understood the power of middle managers when she stated that “it’s the people in the middle who will make or break your organisation’s growth strategy.” (p. 150). It is with this statement in mind, the tangible application of a strategic idea into an actionable task, that this research report has chosen to focus on middle management. While the development of a firm’s strategy and ultimately the strategic direction of the firm is most commonly the responsibility of the executive leadership team, it’s the translation of this strategy into measurable milestones and subsequently the implementation of this strategy by the executive, middle and junior leadership teams within that firm (Faulkner & Campbell, 2003) that dictates success.

When it comes to the transformation of a firm’s strategy, Bucy et al. (2017) have clarified that an “organisation wide and completely holistic” (p. 1) approach is required and that a focus solely on the top-down approach regarding strategy implementation will result in failure. To that end and in support of middle managements’ importance with regards to strategy and operational implementation, Aaltonen and Ikavalko (2002) have recognised that the successful implementation of any strategy requires much more than just the executive leadership team. Furthermore, Aaltonen and Ikavalko (2002) recognised the important role middle managers play within the firm, stating that middle management are in fact key agents within the successful implementation of a firm’s strategy. Essentially, middle managers play a key functional role within the everyday operations of a firm and are responsible for communication and coordination of strategic objectives throughout the firm (Tinline & Cooper, 2016; Balogun, 2003).

Heyden, Wilden and Wise (2020) stated that middle management plays a key role in ensuring a connection exists between the strategic direction and operational execution within a firm. Furthermore, they highlight inefficiencies between strategy development and strategy execution across organisations when this linking role is missing. With this feedback in mind, it stands to reason that a deeper understanding of the required leadership response from middle management in order to successfully implement strategy would be vital for any business. Within an extreme context, however, understanding how to more effectively and efficiently empower middle managers to respond better to the dynamic, uncertain and volatile environments in which they operate will be key going forward. With this understanding, it may be possible to develop leadership support systems that assist middle managers in the successful leadership

response required to manage complexity and therefore assist the greater organisation in achieving success in uncertain, dynamic environments.

2.6.1 Middle Management Identification, Roles and Responsibilities

The definition of middle management often relies on a process involving interpretive job grading centred on the ability of a manager to make decisions or act freely based on their interpretation of a situation (Joshi and Jha, 2017). However, Huy (2011) defined the role of middle management as “any managers two levels below the CEO, and one level above line workers and professionals” (p. 73). This definition is further supported by literature stating that middle managers essentially fill a role that has both subordinates and superiors (Randhawa et al., 2019).

Additionally, middle managers are essentially responsible for implementing the strategic decisions made by senior management through the operationalisation of strategy and the management of subordinates (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). “Middle managers maintain a central position in organizational hierarchies, are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff” (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014, p. 2).

To that end, Aaltonen and Ikavalko (2002) acknowledged that the successful implementation of any strategy requires much more than just the executive leadership team. Aaltonen and Ikavalko (2002) recognised the role of middle managers within the firm as vital, arguing that they are in fact key agents within the successful implementation of a strategy. Additionally, as stated by Tinline and Cooper (2016), middle managers play a key functional role within the everyday operations of a firm and are responsible for communication and coordination of strategic objectives throughout the firm (Balogun, 2003). Understanding the key role that middle managers play within a firm’s eco-system and their importance with regards to the linking of the strategic intent of a firm to the operational implementation of that strategic intent, it becomes clear that middle managers form the midpoint pivot between strategy and action.

Through a more developed understanding of the middle manager’s leadership response within an extreme context, it may be possible to advance additional leadership support systems that assist middle managers in the successful leadership of teams and therefore assist the firm in achieving success within extremely challenging and complex

environments. Joshi and Jha (2017) made reference to the increasingly strategic role assumed by middle managers driven predominately by changes in organisational structures. It is with this increasingly strategic role in mind that the need for additional leadership support systems and processes becomes clear in order to drive more positive outcomes across organisations and ultimately provide middle managers with the support they need to behave both strategically and tactically simultaneously.

2.6.2 Middle Management Business Impact, Influence and Implementation

Randhawa et al. (2019) posit that middle managers occupy the intersection between a firm and its environment, essentially inhabiting a boundary spanning role. They are the first leaders within a firm to sense feedback or information within an environment, while simultaneously also being the first leaders within the firm to legitimately respond. Anicich and Hirsh (2017) have demonstrated that middle managers often link strategic ideas and operational solutions within their firms, essentially taking responsibility for the implementation of firm initiatives, balancing the strategic and operational leadership required at this intersectional point between the firm and the environment in which it operates. Giauque (2015) and Conway & Monks (2011) further support this notion, detailing the critical role middle managers play in the implementation of adaptation within organisations. More recently, Joshi and Jha (2017) demonstrated the influence of middle management to accelerate or hinder adaptation, calling into light the importance of the middle manager's ability to link firm strategy and firm execution.

With the authority to make decisions and the tactical ability to translate strategic concepts into actionable behaviour (Heyden, Wilden & Wise, 2020), middle managers remain incredibly influential within the firm. They fundamentally control the translation of strategic thought into operational action and act as the platform through which information needs to pass in order to transform thought into deed.

2.7 Construct Linkage

In order to understand why each of these constructs have been selected and their relevance to one another, the researcher felt it necessary to highlight the construct linkages in order to provide clarity surrounding their choices.

2.7.1 Complexity Leadership Theory and Extreme Context

Complexity Leadership Theory: Proposed by Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007), Complexity Leadership Theory focuses on the enabling behaviour required by leadership

to drive organisational effectiveness and ultimately aid a firm in learning, creating and adapting within a complex adaptive system. Complexity Leadership Theory seeks to aid firms in the managing of complexity within a system and intends to create, through emergence, a leadership response that delivers adaptive space.

Extreme Context: The COVID-19 pandemic, within the context of this research project, has been defined as an extreme context. It arrived without warning and fundamentally shifted the operating environment across the world, generating widespread panic which has resulted in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological and material consequences for firms (FitzGerald et al., 2020). Hannah et al., (2009) defined an extreme context as:

“...an environment where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organisations capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to or in close physical or psycho-social proximity to – organisation members” (p. 898).

Link: Given that we know firms are complex adaptive systems and that complexity leadership theory attempts to help leaders manage complexity within a system and assist with the required adaptation and simultaneously we know that the COVID-19 pandemic has created extreme contexts for firms and leaders around the world, creating an increase in complexity and requiring further firm adaptation, can complexity leadership theory be utilised to help create the adaptive space for teams and leaders to thrive within a dynamic and uncertain environment.

2.7.2 Complexity Leadership Theory and Middle Management

Middle Management: Heyden, Wilden and Wise (2020) stated that middle management plays a key role in ensuring a connection exists between the strategic direction and operational execution within a firm. Furthermore, they highlight inefficiencies between strategy development and strategy execution across organisations when this linking role is missing. When middle management are engaged, a firm is better able to translate their strategic intent into operational action.

Complexity Leadership Theory: Complexity leadership requires that firms be able to transition between entrepreneurial, operational and enabling leadership styles in order to adapt successfully, thus creating and maintaining the required adaptive space necessary for their firms to thrive.

Link: Given middle managements linking role within their firms between the strategic and operational focus and the fact that complexity leadership requires a shift in leadership style between entrepreneurial, operational and enabling leadership, can a link be made between middle management and complexity leadership in terms of the way in which middle managers behave within their firms.

2.7.3 Middle Management and Extreme Context

Finally, when facing the uncertainty and complexity created within an extreme context and given the linking role between the strategic and operational focus of a firm's middle management, can these middle managers be utilised to decrease the negative impact experienced by firms facing an extreme context if provided a framework that enables them to better understand the complexity they face within an environment and how best to manage that complexity.

2.8 Conclusion

This literature review sought to establish the importance of complexity leadership within the context of an extreme environment. Furthermore, it aimed to uncover how middle management could make use of the various leadership responses provided by Complexity Leadership Theory in order to manage the complexity created within a system operating within an extreme context. Additionally, the literature review attempted to clearly position the role of middle managers within a firm and the ability of middle managers to drive both strategic and operational inputs within the firm, thereby positively influencing the response of a firm to an extreme context.

Based on the theory and literature presented in this chapter, it can be argued that complexity within operating environments across the world is increasing. Additionally, it has been presented that complexity within the system remains high when facing and operating within an extreme context, and that firms will be required to adapt in order to attain the level of success required to continue to maintain their competitive advantage. Furthermore, the literature has established the importance of middle managers and their

potential response to complexity within an extreme context, demonstrating their importance for successful operation within dynamic environments.

There are, however, some gaps within the Complexity Leadership Theory literature that require further exploration, specifically surrounding middle managers' behaviours and their leadership response to extreme contexts. A deeper understanding of the vital link middle management plays in the firm's ability to manage the strategic and operational elements of the firm within an extreme context will facilitate:

1. Better engagement with the strategic and operational objectives of firms facing extreme environments.
2. Opportunity to uncover/explore frameworks that will assist middle managers to better lead and adapt as necessary.

The following chapter will attempt to clarify those gaps and explore them deeper in an attempt to uncover some additional insight and ultimately add value both academically and practically.

3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Introduction

Through the exploration of the various leadership phenomena and the insights gathered surrounding leadership response while operating within an extreme context, this study sought to further explore and understand how middle management was required to shift their leadership response between entrepreneurial, enabling and operational leadership behaviour in order to manage the requisite complexity within the environment.

The aim of this study was to further investigate the various leadership phenomena through the exploration of middle management experiences. The study assessed feelings and stories and to gather insights into their lived experience of managing and leading throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in an attempt to provide additional understanding of complexity leadership within an extreme context.

3.2 Research Question 1

What leadership response was required to successfully deal with the leadership challenges presented within an extreme context?

Hannah et al. (2009) stated that additional research is required to explore the leadership response and the effects of such leadership response within the context of an extreme event, an area relatively unexplored within the literature to date. Furthermore, Hannah, Campbell and Matthews (2010) concluded that a balance of leadership styles ranging between directive leadership through to participative leadership may be appropriate when facing extreme contexts and that a suitable balance within this leadership spectrum will vary depending on the nature or phase of the threat. This research question focused specifically on establishing whether middle management leaders consciously changed their personal leadership style in order to more effectively and efficiently manage the complexity created by the extreme context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3 Research Question 2

How might the required leadership response shift across the periods that precede, during and following the extreme contexts when managing the various strategic and operational changes required by the firm?

Further calls for exploration into the specific leadership styles required to manage the implementation of both strategic and operational shifts within firms prior, during and post an extreme context will add supplementary information to the growing complexity leadership literature knowledge base while simultaneously aiding business in their approach to extreme context leadership Hannah et al. (2009). This question sought to probe the interviewed participants surrounding an active decision to utilise different approaches based on the context in which they were operating. Through the exploration of the decision to change leadership approaches, it can be further understood how middle managers were interpreting the various signals from both the internal and external environments and adjusting accordingly to drive more effective results.

3.4 Research Question 3

How did leaders ensure their teams continued to operate successfully while facing an extreme context?

Zaccaro, Heinen and Shuffler (2009) postulated that the correct leadership response to extreme contexts will reduce the stressors surrounding the performance of specific tasks and encourage effective teamwork. However, Burke, Shuffler and Wiese (2018) demonstrated that limited research has been conducted into the facilitation of effective teamwork within extreme contexts. This question sought to explore the leadership responses, while operating within an extreme context, that were successful and unsuccessful from a middle manager's perspective. This could provide future insight and perhaps guide thinking surrounding the beneficial actions and behaviours leaders may adopt when facing complex environmental changes and challenges.

3.5 Research Question 4

How should leaders mentally make sense of the environment and ultimately retain personal leadership effectiveness while facing an extreme context?

Given the growing complexity within the operating environment, an exploration of how leaders process and make sense of complexity within an extreme event will provide useful insight into the management of complexity within a dynamic environment by leadership (Mumford et al., 2007). This question aimed to further explore the growing literature surrounding complexity leadership with a specific focus on the leader's personal experience and their ability to manage themselves during a very challenging

period. It sought to make a contribution to the way in which managers manage themselves during these challenging periods.

3.6 Conclusion

The above highlighted questions outline the key focal areas of this study which aimed to make a contribution to the complexity leadership literature, as well as the literature surrounding leadership within extreme contexts. The study aimed to explore middle managers' experiences of operating under extreme circumstances in order to gather insight on the appropriate and successful use of Complexity Leadership Theory to manage an incredibly challenging set of scenarios. The chapter that follows will detail the study methodology used to gather the data and create the insight provided.

4 CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the research methodology utilised across this research report. The reviewed literature informed the research questions, detailed in Chapter 3, which thus informed the selected research methodology. This research project adopted a qualitative exploratory approach, further supported by both the data sampling and data analysis that reinforced this approach. This chapter provides further detail on the selected methodology.

4.2 Choice of Methodology

Given the in-depth insight required surrounding the leadership response of middle managers to an extreme context, an in-depth qualitative and exploratory approach was selected (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2012). The philosophical foundation of this project is an interpretivist one given how this research philosophy deeply explores the social actors' behavioural nuances within a particular context. Leitch, Hill, and Harrison (2010) suggested that interpretivist research entails capturing the experiences and in-depth understanding that social actors apply to an experienced phenomenon, hence the selection of interpretivism for this research.

This research attempted to understand middle managers' lived experience at a micro-level in terms of their leadership response when facing an extreme context. In order to achieve this, the research needed to explore the participants' experiences, feelings and stories from within the context of their changing environments in an attempt to understand their leadership responses and ultimately their actions, mental frames and behaviours.

This qualitative research sought to interpret the perceptions and experiences of managers and their individual leadership strategies when facing extreme contexts. It further aimed to build on the leadership literature that already exists but is limited in terms of its focus on environmental and organisational context, specifically surrounding middle management and the individual micro-level behaviours required to lead within extreme contexts.

Qualitative, exploratory research has been described by Zikmund (2000, p. 102) as the “initial research conducted to clarify and define the nature of the problem” and hence the purpose of this research design is exploratory. Saunders and Lewis (2018) described exploratory research as a method through which new phenomena may be studied in order to “seek new insights, ask new questions and assess topics in a new light” (p. 115). The qualitative nature of this research lends itself towards a single data collection method, namely semi-structured interviews. Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) posited that qualitative investigation is an inductive process which allows for the discovery of interconnected relationships through the exploration of questions, further adding academic weight to the choice of methodology for this research.

A phenomenological approach was selected based on the appreciation of the social reality of participants by understanding their subjective experiences (Bhattacharjee, 2012). According to Creswell (2012, p.76) “a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon”. This particular research report is representative of a particular point in time and therefore is a cross-sectional research report (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2013).

4.3 Population

The selected population for this research included middle managers who occupied middle management positions in South Africa from 1 March 2020 to 15 November 2020 – the identified period. This period covers:

- Period 1 (Pre-Extreme Context)
- Period 2 (During Extreme Context)
- Period 3 (Post-Extreme Context)

The sample was selected from a population that included a variety of different business sectors and management functions and was not firm- or industry-specific. Once anchored within the various phases, these middle managers were able to provide rich, deep and meaningful insight into their lived experience of the vastly different phases experienced by their firms while facing extreme contexts and, ultimately, what this has meant for them personally within the context of their leadership response.

4.4 Unit of Analysis

Bhattacharjee (2012) defined the unit of analysis within research as the individual, group, organisation or country that is the target of the research. In the case of this research, the opinions of the middle managers within a firm, shaped through their lived experiences, formed the unit of analysis.

4.5 Sampling Method and Size

Saunders and Lewis (2018) stated that because a complete list of the population is not available, we cannot ascertain the statistical generalisability of the sample. Given the inability to produce a specific sampling frame as per the identified population, the sampling method chosen was non-probability, purposive sampling. The researcher made use of non-probability, purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling, based on the criteria listed within the population subheading to select the required participants (those holding middle management role during the specified dates and who were willing to participate in the research project).

Furthermore, and based on present literature, the researcher required 12 interviews or more based on the suggested qualitative research proposal requirements surrounding the validity of a sample for a qualitative study (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Saunders (1982), however, stipulated that the quality of interviews far outweighs the quantity of interviews conducted when it comes to phenomenological studies and suggested that while the ideal number of candidates will largely be driven by the topic under investigation, sufficient information may be gathered from three to six individuals.

4.6 Response Saturation

The researcher however, in an attempt to ensure the research project retained its reliability and validity, tracked the participants responses until such time as the participants raised similar items during the interviews. At this stage the researcher deemed saturation had been achieved. Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) have stated that saturation serves as a reliable indicator that sufficient interviews have been conducted.

Respondent Interviews: Theme Saturation

Respondent	Codes	New Codes
Respondent 1	25	25
Respondent 2	23	9
Respondent 3	29	12
Respondent 4	25	8
Respondent 5	23	6
Respondent 6	27	6
Respondent 7	25	6
Respondent 8	26	1
Respondent 9	27	1
Respondent 10	27	0
Respondent 11	29	0
Respondent 12	25	0

Table 1: Respondent Interviews - Theme Saturation

4.7 Data Collection Method

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire as the basis for the broader discussion while allowing the participants to dive deeper into the specific phenomena. Weiss (2004) highlighted that in-depth interviewing clarifies previous events and allows the researcher to dig into the personal descriptions of these past events, providing insight that otherwise would not be attainable through other data collection methods. Rubin and Rubin (1995) posited that semi-structured interviews allow data to be gathered by the interviewer through the use of predetermined questions but that the semi-structured nature of the interview provides latitude for the researcher to explore answers further and clarify detail as required in order to ensure the correct understanding of what the participant is communicating is achieved. Given the phenomenological nature of the research and the depth and richness required from the participants on the subject, this research strategy was deemed most compatible.

The researcher made use of semi-structured interviews to gather rich, deep insights from the participants as well as foster an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question (Roulston, 2010). The research was designed in such a way as to anchor the proposed subjects within three distinctive phases. This grouped participants' various experiences in order to provide clarity around leadership perspectives, attitudes, experiences and interpretations within these different periods in the form of an interview protocol. This specific protocol was used to guide the interviewer in a structured manner

within each interview and further allowed the interviewer to anchor the respondent in each phase of the experience (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). These periods included:

- Period 1: Pre-Extreme Context: This period encapsulated the operation of the firm prior to the arrival of the pandemic and the leadership response to that environmental context.
- Period 2: During Extreme Context: This period encapsulated the operation from the first signs of a contextual shift in the environment, including the mandated lockdown period, until such time that the required changes within the business had been made in response to the environmental shifts and the leadership response to that environmental context.
- Period 3: Post Extreme Context: This period encapsulated the operation of the firm post the mandated lockdown, the opening up of world following the lifting of government restrictions and the move towards the 'new normal' following the response to the market shift and the leadership response to that environmental context.

All semi-structured interviews were conducted via a digital/online video call (Zoom call) in order to ensure the method remained standardised. These interviews were also recorded for reference as well as for transcription post the interview and prior to coding. Each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes with the focus remaining on the quality of the interview and not on interview quantity (Sanders, 1982). At the end of the interview process, the researcher also asked participants if they, based on a discussed and outlined set of sample criteria, could suggest and facilitate the introduction to the researcher of any other potential participants.

4.8 Interview Guide

An interview guide was used throughout the semi-structured interview process in order to gather in-depth insights from the participants and ultimately foster a deeper understanding of the information gathered (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). As suggested by Jacob and Furgerson (2012), the use of open-ended questions throughout the interview allowed the participants to provide insights into their experiences, sharing their own views, stories and anecdotes as required. Additionally and as encouraged by Jacob and

Furgerson (2012), the researcher was open to sharing personally with the participants in order to foster an open dialogue and create a mutual sense of trust within the interview.

Further to the guidelines provided by Jacob and Furgerson (2012) regarding semi-structured interview protocols, the interview guide was developed with the specific research questions discussed in Chapter 3 in mind. This guide was then utilised by the researcher to ensure the highlighted milestones within the semi-structured interview were covered. These milestones included highlighting the basis of the interview, the process and duration of the interview, the necessary ethical guidelines and the questions required to prompt the responses needed to uncover the middle management leadership response insights.

Questions within the interviews were asked in order where possible, however, given the very nature of the interview method, latitude was provided to the participant to expand on certain areas during the interview as necessary and as such, certain questions were covered interchangeably (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The final interview guide utilised throughout the research project has been included as Appendix 3.

4.9 Pilot Testing

Through a pilot test of the interview guide, the researcher was able to ensure the questions asked were both relevant and specific enough to retrieve credible, fitting, auditable and confirmable data that was aligned to the research questions established in chapter 3 (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016). Additionally, the pilot test was used to streamline the semi-structured interview, learning from potential misunderstandings or issues that arose during the pilot as well as acting a time check to ensure that the interview and the relevant questions would fit into the allocated time scheduled with each respondent. Finally, given the use of technology within the interview process, the pilot was used to test the systems, emails, meeting links, recording capability and recorded interview retrieval to ensure that risks were mitigated where possible during the scheduled and real-time interviews.

This pilot interview was conducted on a fellow student who was briefed to ensure the questions asked within the semi-structured interview corresponded to the subject matter in question. The pilot also helped ensure the researcher remained clear when asking questions, clear in thought when exploring insights, impartial and open to digging deeper into the key insights provided. Following the pilot test, it became clear that a number of

questions were repeated throughout the interview in various forms which required further thought and simplification. Additionally, the order of some of the questions within the interview guide required review based on the flow of the discussion.

Testing the semi-structured interview methodology also provided a mental framework for the researcher in terms of the flow of semi-structured interviews. This provided some insight into how the researcher should conduct the interviews going forward to provide a better experience for the participant in terms of conversation, leading to richer data during the live interviews. The initial interview guide utilised within the pilot interview has been listed as Appendix 4. The final interview guide utilised, following the required changes made based on the pilot interview, has been included as Appendix 3.

4.10 Analysis Approach

Braun and Clarke (2006) as well as Bowen (2009) suggested a phased process when undertaking research data analysis. The researcher followed this same process in terms of the analytical approach applied to this research project, as follows:

- Phase 1: Data Familiarisation: In this phase the researcher transcribed the interviews, read and reread the interview transcripts in conjunction with any supplementary notes taken during the interviews and familiarised himself with the data produced by the interviews (Bowen, 2009) in order to ensure that data was familiar and understood.
- Phase 2: Initial Code Generation: This phase involved the categorising of the gathered data into meaningful groups and segments which were then further categorised to generate the required insight and comparison required (Bowen, 2009). *Atlas.ti* (qualitative analysis software) was utilised in coding the data to ensure reliability and validity of the code generation.
- Phase 3: Theme Search: This stage followed the generation of the codes and the categorisation of data. It involved the collation of the various categories from phase two into potential themes with the researcher making specific notes of potential overlapping themes as well as data that was contrary to any themes.

- Phase 4: Theme Review: The created themes were then further analysed and overlapping themes were explored further. Contrary themes or themes that did not align within the defined research project scope were discarded.
- Phase 5: Theme Definition: Continued analysis of the data and the themes resulted in key overarching themes that required development of key definitions and the creation of a thematic map.
- Phase 6: Report Production: Finally, the selection of the relevant extracts, analysis of the data and the extraction of key insights from the data has resulted in the production of the research project. This report aims to flow seamlessly through from the research questions and the completed literature review to the presentation of the data in Chapters 5 and 6 in order to provide the necessary insights required in Chapter 7. This should offer a meaningful contribution to both the academic subject matter as well as the practical business application.

4.11 Quality Control

Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson and Spiers (2002) suggested that without rigor, research loses its usefulness and becomes worthless. Guba and Lincoln (1981) posited that rigor or "trustworthiness" within qualitative research methodology attempts to ensure research findings are credible, fitting, auditable and confirmable. These seminal authors suggested specific strategies be used to attain trustworthiness that include negative cases, peer debriefing, extended engagement and continued observation, audit trails and member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Additionally, Guba and Lincoln (1981) further suggested that the characteristics of the researcher as well as the researcher's ability to be responsive and adaptive are key factors in ensuring research remained trustworthy.

Morse et al. (2002) argued, however, that strategies for ensuring rigor shouldn't be completed post-hoc and should be built into the qualitative research process. Attributes such as investigator responsiveness, methodological coherence, theoretical sampling and sampling adequacy, an active analytic stance, and data saturation could all be considered active methods of ensuring both reliability and validity of the research data collected (Morse et al., 2002). Furthermore, Morse et al. (2002) called for research verification throughout the report which ultimately refers to the systems and safeguards used by the researcher during the research process to continually ratify the reliability and

validity of the report and thus the rigor of a research report. These mechanisms need to be built into the research design in order to identify and correct errors during the research process. Given the iterative nature of qualitative research, the ability to ensure correspondence between question formulation, literature, respondent recruitment, data collection methodology and analysis requires the researcher to remain relatively dynamic within the collection of data.

With that in mind, Morse et al. (2002) suggested that data be systematically checked to ensure focus is maintained, data relevance is reviewed, conceptual analysis is conducted, and interpretation is constantly monitored. All of these actions assist the researcher in understanding when to make changes to the research process in order to ensure the rigor of the research report. Based on the theoretical thinking framed above, the below framework was used to ensure reliability and validity, specifically focused on methodological coherence, sampling sufficiency, the development of a dynamic relationship between sampling, data collection and analysis, theoretical thinking and theory development (Morse et al., 2002) through the following methods:

- *Methodological Coherence*: Methodological coherence attempts to ensure correspondence between the research questions and various components of the selected method (Morse et al., 2002). In the case of this research, methodological coherence attempts to ensure proposed questions correspond to the phenomenological methodology suggested and attempt to uncover the deep, insightful, rich content required from the participants. The pilot interview conducted on a fellow student assisted the researcher in ensuring that the methodological coherence within the interview guide and ultimately across the research project remained accurate and aligned with the goals and requirements of the research project.
- *Appropriate Sampling*: Appropriate sampling attempts to ensure that the participants selected to participate within the research are in fact the correct participants to be interviewed, and whether they represent the highlighted sample (Morse et al., 2002). Within this research report, the selected participants were required to meet the outlined criteria detailed within the sample description in order to be considered as viable research candidates.
- *Data Collection and Analysis*: Morse et al. (2002) suggested that collecting and analysing data simultaneously allows the researcher to constantly update what is

known and unknown within the contextual framework, with reference to the topic being researched. Within this research, data was collected, reviewed, coded, analysed and compared against data collected previously in order to understand both the findings and what these findings mean within the research context. Specifically, data was collected in batches that provided the researcher time to review the collected data, review the audio recordings and completed transcripts and to analyse, reflect and adjust as required.

- *Theoretical Thinking*: While reviewing what is known and understanding where gaps existed based on the conducted literature review, new ideas began to emerge while at the same time, existing theories were being confirmed by the collected data. Theoretical thinking requires the managing of perspectives at the micro and macro environmental level while slowly moving the research forward through the development of a strong theoretical base, quantified and confirmed by the data (Morse et al., 2002). This research project attempted to build a strong literature understanding in order to ensure the very foundation of the research project itself was built on solid, theoretical ideas supported by robust literature.
- *Theory Development*: Ultimately, the research project makes a contribution to both the academic literature as well as the required and highlighted business research need. In order to do that, the research project was required to move considerably between a micro perspective of the data (within the context of the sample, participants and the environment) and the macro conceptual/theoretical understanding already in existence (Morse et al., 2002). This was done within this research through the reliance on and in conjunction with the researcher's assigned research supervisor who remained subjective and was able to review the work as required and provide objective feedback.

Through the use of the above methods, this research project aimed to ensure both reliability and validity were evident across the project and ultimately provide rigor surrounding the project's findings and the conclusions and contributions made towards the subject. Additionally, the research data will be provided to GIBS on a hard drive to be stored for ten years as per the instructions, systems and processes dictated by GIBS. Additionally, this data will be stored without identifiers and only aggregated data will be reported to ensure confidentiality of the respondents within the interviews.

4.12 Limitations

Key limitations within the research proposal have been identified and explored below:

- *Research Aims and Objectives:* The proposed research aims and objectives within this project may have been formulated too broadly. Given the sheer size of the studied themes within the literature and the limited ability to narrow further into each theme, the report may be limited in its view.
- *Data Collection Limitations:* Given the limited experience of the researcher in primary data collection and specifically in the collection of data during semi-structured interviews, the suggested method of data collection and the execution of that method may be a cause for the report's limitation.
- *Sample Selection and Size:* While the nature and methodology of the research did not require a large sample, the selection of the sample as well as possible access to the required respondents could potentially be a limitation of the report.
- *Scope of Discussions:* Given the already raised issues and limitation surrounding the researcher's lack of experience within the field, a consideration surrounding the limitation of this project exists with the scope and depth of discussions held during the semi-structured interviews.
- *An Ever-Dynamic Environment:* As discussed and repeatedly highlighted across the research project, the world today is constantly changing, hyper-dynamic and incredibly complex. The rate of change, market volatility and increasing uncertainty makes long-term decisions and strategy formation incredibly challenging. Everything could change almost instantly. While in the past a statement such as that may have been received as overly dramatic, the extreme context in which business have operated within this research project has demonstrated that certainty is limited. With that in mind, the fact remains that the theoretical and practical recommendations based on this research project and the data gathered within this project may already be outdated, limiting the impact of this project.
- *Response Bias:* Response bias from the participants could be an additional limitation of this research report. Participants could have answered in accordance with what they assumed the researcher wanted to hear as opposed to their truthful thoughts or

experiences to date. Given the difficulty many have faced throughout the extreme context period, participants could also be embarrassed or ashamed of their actions, thoughts or leadership response to the extreme context and could be attempting to save face within the interview.

4.13 Ethical Considerations

As per the guidelines provided by the University of Pretoria, ethical clearance was obtained through the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria prior to any research being undertaken (Appendix 1).

In an attempt to protect the confidentiality of the various managers interviewed and to further create an environment of openness and trust, interviewers within the research sample signed a letter of consent detailing that all data would be reported and stored without identifiers (Appendix 2). Furthermore, the signing of a confidentiality agreement was conducted with all parties involved within the production of this research report (Appendix 6).

All of these ethical considerations were undertaken as per the suggested and agreed methodology stipulated by the University of Pretoria and enforced by the Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria.

4.14 Conclusion

This section of the report has provided an outline of the methodology that was applied to this research report. The methodology covered the population of the research focus, its unit of analysis, the selected sampling method and size, provided an interview guide to facilitate the interviews, and discussed the pilot interview conducted. Further, the chapter discussed the data collection method and the analysis approach regarding the data and discussed the reliability and validity of the study. It highlighted and made reference to the ethical considerations of the study and listed some of the potential limitations of the study. The following chapter will present the collected data prior to its review and analysis.

5 CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the key findings of the research report and aligns to the research questions stipulated in Chapter 3 of this report, which were distilled through the literature review conducted within Chapter 2. The presentation of these results aligns to the research questions which ultimately were used to develop the interview guide (Appendix 3) that formed the backbone of the semi-structured interviews used to gather the data below.

The researcher began all interviews with an attempt to unpack what leadership meant to each participant as well as the participant's experience of leadership to date, both from a leader and a follower perspective. This opening discussion question was selected for two specific strategic reasons:

1. To create common ground between the researcher and the participant, establishing a conversational tone between both parties given the topic to be discussed and to provide the participant a platform from which to discuss their views on the leadership topic.
2. To provide an anchored perspective from the participant on what leadership entails given how broad a topic leadership can be within a group of people.

The focus of this research report however remains on the identified research questions highlighted in Chapter 3 and therefore the participants' views of what makes successful leaders will not be discussed or analysed.

5.2 Description of Sample

The sample, as highlighted within Chapter 4, included middle managers who occupied middle management leadership positions during the identified period in South Africa over a specific time period – namely 01 March 2020 to 15 November 2020. The sample was selected from a population that included a variety of different business sectors and management functions and was not firm- or industry specific. Participants were accessed through the researcher's personal networks based on a specific set of identified sampling criteria.

This qualitative study consists of 12 interviewees whose respondent profiles are detailed below:

5.2.1 Respondent Profiles – Individual Data

Respondent	Age	Gender	Job Title
Respondent 1	37	M	Sales & Marketing Executive
Respondent 2	39	M	Senior Manager
Respondent 3	37	M	Business Lead
Respondent 4	32	M	Project Manager
Respondent 5	34	M	Commercial Executive
Respondent 6	38	M	Head of Sales, South Africa
Respondent 7	33	F	Area Director, South Africa
Respondent 8	42	M	Project Portfolio Manager
Respondent 9	31	M	Head of Operations (Business Unit)
Respondent 10	28	F	ESG Consultant
Respondent 11	30	M	Senior Manager
Respondent 12	30	F	Manager

Table 2: Respondent Profiles - Individual Data

Male: 9 Male participants Female: 3 Female participants

5.2.2 Respondent Profiles – Professional Data

Respondent	Sector	FTE	Industry
Respondent 1	Private	+250	Food & Beverage
Respondent 2	Private	1 - 9	Real Estate
Respondent 3	Private	10 - 49	Professional Services
Respondent 4	Public	+250	Power Utility
Respondent 5	Private	+250	Real Estate
Respondent 6	Private	+250	Hospitality
Respondent 7	Private	+250	Hospitality
Respondent 8	Private	+250	Oil & Gas
Respondent 9	Private	+250	Real Estate
Respondent 10	Private	10 – 49	Professional Services
Respondent 11	Private	+250	Professional Services
Respondent 12	Private	10 – 49	Professional Services

Table 3: Respondent Profile - Professional Data

The participants were predominantly from private sector large enterprise firms with over +250 full time employees (FTE). The industries in which the participants operated was broad and included product, services and professional services firms.

5.2.3 Respondent Profiles – Sample Criteria Confirmation

Respondent	Role Tenure	Direct Reports	Exec Engagement
Respondent 1	22 months	10 - 15	Daily
Respondent 2	16 months	3 – 5	Daily
Respondent 3	14 months	6 - 10	Weekly
Respondent 4	38 months	6 - 10	Weekly
Respondent 5	30 months	3 – 5	Monthly
Respondent 6	18 months	10 - 15	Monthly
Respondent 7	27 months	10 - 15	Monthly
Respondent 8	48 months	10 - 15	Quarterly
Respondent 9	62 months	10 - 15	Monthly
Respondent 10	35 months	3 – 5	Daily
Respondent 11	31 months	3 – 5	Daily
Respondent 12	53 months	3 – 5	Daily

Table 4: Respondent Profile - Sample Criteria Confirmation

All the respondents within the sample aligned with the criteria outlined in Chapter 4 of the research report and were in a middle management leadership position, as further defined in Chapter 2 of this research project, within the outlined periods in question. Additionally, all of the participants had at least a minimum of 3 direct reports that required management through the outlined extreme context. Furthermore, the level of executive engagement, measured in terms of engagement on a time basis has been included to demonstrate and reinforce the boundary spanning nature of the middle managers, engaging with their direct reports as well as their firm's executive leadership often.

5.3 Results: Research Question 1

What leadership response was required to successfully deal with the leadership challenges presented within an extreme context?

Given the limited research that exists surrounding the leadership response required when facing an extreme context, this research project has attempted to understand and

explore the key response behaviours that have emerged from middle management leaders throughout the highlighted period. The leadership responses below have emerged as focal areas across the participants based on their lived experiences throughout the identified extreme context period and will be discussed in further detail within this section. Additionally, Table 5 provides a brief summary of the identified key leadership responses noted by the participants when leading within an extreme context.

Question 1: What leadership response was required to successfully deal with the leadership challenges presented within an extreme context?	
Leadership Response	Summary
Sense Making and Sense Giving	Leaders were required to both 'sense make' and 'sense give' to their teams, assimilating a large amount of information and accepting that there were still large amounts of information missing but that teams were still required to continue to move forward regardless.
Increased Transparent Communication	Continued open and honest communication was required throughout the identified period as leaders were required to manage their teams on both a professional and personal level.
Ongoing Team 'Collaboration'	Teams were required to come together and work on problems that potentially they had no previous experience dealing with. Additionally, leaders were required to lean on their teams and their networks for additional help and support.
Managing Uncertainty through Autonomy	While uncertainty often causes leaders to try and assume more control, it seems leaders provided their teams with more freedom to make decisions autonomously, freeing up the leaders to do what was required on their end.
People vs Task Focused Approach	Leaders assumed a more people-centric approach in comparison to a task-centric approach to their leadership style, remaining cognisant of the strain their teams were under based on the context in which they were operating.

Table 5: Question 1 - Brief Response Summary

5.3.1 Leadership Response: Sense Making and Sense Giving

The ability of a leader to contextualise a large amount of information and provide that information back to their team in manageable and simplified ways was listed by the participants who specifically referenced developing frameworks for their teams in which to operate.

So for me I focus a lot of energy making sure there is that proper framework, making sure that if we talk and argue about outcomes, I always relate it back to them and then once the people can see this almost invisible wall you know, they are very much happy and they enjoy it. (Respondent 6, 2020)

You have to filter that information to different contexts you know – how they receive it and how they distributes it. (Respondent 7, 2020)

I think the team feels best if they have a very good framework that they can operate in. They feel very secure and you have brilliant performance. (Respondent 8, 2020)

I am not withholding information, but all I am saying is focus and not to blame the management or pass on the risk, but to kind of buffer it a bit and give the fullest opportunity for that guy to flourish. (Respondent 8, 2020)

This 'sense making' was not only focused on the relationship between the leader and the followers but also between the middle managers and the senior leadership teams where middle managers were required to act as the link between the strategic and operational sides of their firms.

But it is ultimately to ensure that the right messages are coming forward and the right sort of decisions are being made from a middle management perspective and that mirrors the sort of decision making in the strategy and the objectives of the senior execs. (Respondent 8, 2020)

Leaders were cognisant of the fact that they were required to make sense of the uncertainty within the environment where possible, however, a number of participants did reference that often, they were uncertain about the information, strategy and approach themselves. With that in mind, their focus was sense making where possible and alternatively it was ensuring a level of calm existed within their teams.

I think for me the initial thing was dealing with people's fears of the unknown and misinformation and not understanding the issue fully. And when I say that, I didn't even understand it fully. (Respondent 9, 2020)

I think the first point of call is obviously to try and bring calmness to the organisation and try and reassure people that things will be okay to the best of our knowledge. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Additionally, a response from the participants when they didn't have the answers to make sense of the dynamic environment in which they were operating was transparency.

I truly believe that you should play open cards with your teams, so when they understand why things are happening you begin from 'This is what we want to do, this is why we want to do it, this is where things are coming from to build all of this up. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Assessing the new information in the environment, attempting to understand it and where necessary, accept that they couldn't make sense of it and required additional assistance were all part of the leadership response from participants within the sample as they attempted to 'sense make' and 'sense give' for their teams and firms.

5.3.2 Leadership Response: Increased Transparent Communication

Communication across teams is absolutely necessary for teams to successfully engage and produce positive results, regardless of the environment in which they operate. While engaging within an extreme context, and specifically within this particular context where teams and the team leaders were often physically separated, communication was a primary focus.

It was difficult, because there was a lot of uncertainty and a lot of adaption that needed to take place, and we didn't know how it was going to play out. So, in a sense the first point or the first step was almost a level of calmness, and communication – and I think the only way you can do that is to communicate effectively. (Respondent 5, 2020)

I think you have to keep that line of communication so that people know what is going on. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Communication as a focal point seemed to allow leaders to provide both insight and to make sense where possible, of the changing and often complicated or uncertain environment, bringing a level of calm to the team members within each leader's remit.

I think calmness was definitely the first thing and trying to open up lines of communication – which is what we did very effectively. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Additionally, the insights gained established that communication needed to be used to open a dialogue between the team leader and the team members, ensuring that the same message was being provided across the team and via a number of different platforms. Additionally, it was vital that the message being communicated to the team was clear and considered.

But those lines of communication have got to be streamlined and have got to be put forward in a proper manner, in a proper language. (Respondent 5, 2020)

And given the fact that we have 50 properties nationwide you know, it is quite the exercise to make sure that everyone is getting the same message. (Respondent 6, 2020)

And then obviously we couldn't have company meetings but what I did was I set up a WhatsApp broadcast group that was open for any staff member, regardless of seniority, and we have about 500 overall, to join the WhatsApp group and get updates directly from us. (Respondent 1, 2020)

Transparency of communication, a response that will be highlighted below, was an item noted by middle managers in reference to the communication being passed from senior leadership downwards to the middle managers and to the remaining staff throughout the various firms. Proactive, continued and transparent communication about the business, the operating environment and the changes, challenges and threats facing the businesses was a key focal point raised by participants.

And that is a very important part of the culture and the way that we manage, is around communication – and they didn't hold back in terms of what they were communicating with the team, no matter what level you were at. And I think that is always a difficult situation to manage because you don't want to create panic, but you also have to make sure that everyone is on board. (Respondent 9, 2020)

I think at the same time as well we started to get communications from our senior leadership partners, who – and I guess they needed to communicate with the firm what was happening – they needed to give us a bit of guidance of how to cope with this. But at the same time, they also made it explicitly clear that from now until things settle down, no promotions, and no salary increases as well. (Respondent 11, 2020)

Feedback seemed to decisively confirm that communication from leadership to team members needed to be proactive, transparent, frequent, open and honest. It was about communicating to the teams that the road ahead was serious, that it was going to be tough but that the leadership were there to help and support.

I think clearly, very strongly, if you are not communicating with your team, I mean then I am not quite sure what you are doing. (Respondent 12, 2020)

So, it is forging through and trying to find the right thing to do, whilst at the same time it is very, very important, especially in these circumstances, to not let your team freak out, because if you don't kind of keep calm and assist them with whatever it is ... like you need to make sure that they understand that this is serious that we are going through this, it's like the WHO wouldn't just say shut down the world right now for no reason whatsoever. So, it is serious. (Respondent 7, 2020)

While dealing with threats across the business that included health and wellness related threats for their teams as well financial impact threats that included job loses, redundancies, pay cuts and business foreclosures, leaders felt it necessary to operate as transparently as possible in order to successfully manage their teams. Leaders acknowledged that there were numerous questions that they were not able to answer but that by remaining transparent, they could remain as honest as possible with their teams.

I think the main thing was then also to remind the teams that we are all going through something really crazy right now. No one alive has gone through this and our no. I priority is you, your no. I priority is you. And my no. I priority is me as well. So, you need to take care of yourself. (Respondent 6, 2020)

I think for me it is very much about open communication and playing open cards with your team. (Respondent 2, 2020)

If I look back to the pressure that everyone was under in terms of workload and you know, they were quite conservative around 'we really don't want to reduce hours, we are not going to pay salary increases, we are not going to pay bonuses, but management has always been very forthcoming with these types of information. So, they didn't hold back at all, so we were well aware of our situations and how to manage our projects. (Respondent 11, 2020)

How to manage a team through all of that, there are just continuous questions coming through. So, I think the main thing was to ensure that they know no one knows, and then what we think we know right now might change within the next hour. (Respondent 12, 2020)

Leaders were willing to face the tough questions and answer as honestly and openly as possible, making reference to the fact that there were a number of unknowns.

That's the communication we took, and ja, I think it worked quite well you know, being able to ask the CEO questions and some of them were tough questions, like 'Are we going to have retrenchments?' and the CFO saying, 'The possibility is very, very high but we are looking at all mechanisms and stuff that we can do before we go down to cutting staff.' (Respondent 9, 2020)

Simultaneously, leaders were required to remind staff that without people operating to the best of their ability, there would be financial implications. Leaders were transparent about the unknowns. But they were also transparent about the fact that the business needed everybody to continue to operate as best they could to ensure they could mitigate the financial risks to their firms.

I think I have been very clear with my team in terms of what we have to do to get out of this, and I have had one or two people say 'Listen, I need to talk about my salary' and I am like 'Well we will talk about my salary too, we know where we are at, we know what needs to get done and go out and do it, your salary is in your own hands! Come, let's go get this done!' (Respondent 1, 2020)

But the fear factor in the staff, you had a lot of staff saying we are putting their lives at risk, and, and... And that was dealing with that emotion, I remember a mother phoning me, one of our staff members, and how she was literally crying over the phone that we are putting their lives at risk and her mother lives with them, what if she catches the virus? Some serious concerns, and how to deal with that aspect but also again, from a management perspective, understanding 'Listen, we need to do this otherwise we are in like deep, deep trouble.' (Respondent 9, 2020)

5.3.3 Leadership Response: Ongoing Team 'Collaboration'

Collaboration as a leadership focus area was evident across all of the interviews, with leaders being very clear that taking a collaborative approach within the extreme context was necessary to create engagement and traction across the teams they lead.

While every single participant within the research project made mention of the word 'collaboration' during the interviews, it was evident that for some leaders, collaboration meant more focus on ensuring the team was strategically aligned and understood what needed to be done.

There is upfront collaboration, you have got to set the directions, set the narrative up front, give people the north star to follow and then guide them along that path. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Because the consensus and acknowledging people's voices and making sure that those voices are heard, is key on the journey. So, they feel they have bought in. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Other leaders, however, wanted their team's input and wanted to ensure their teams were providing feedback, suggestions and ideas on direction and next steps within the ever changing and incredibly complex environment they were facing.

And then from there to go and say 'This is what we are thinking we would like to do to get to that point. What do you guys think? How would you approach it?'. (Respondent 7, 2020)

Participants understood how important collaboration was though to retaining their team's focus and direction.

Collaboration I think is one thing I have come to realise is probably the most valuable traits that a great leader can have. (Respondent 4, 2020)

5.3.4 Leadership Response: Managing Uncertainty through Autonomy

Complexity and uncertainty within the environment were key elements referenced by the research participants within this extreme context, with numerous leaders making reference to being unsure of which direction they needed to pursue, both operationally and strategically.

So, it wasn't like you had any reference point to really go back to. So it was kind of tricky! You didn't know what to do, I didn't know what to do. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Having never faced the environmental shifts that were being experienced, middle managers were forced to balance previous operational and strategic leadership

frameworks with new information, adding a level of complexity that most of them had never faced or experienced before.

But where the complexity really came in there was you really now had to understand this building which had different clients, different members, different businesses, with different needs, with different time frames. So again, balancing all those factors in terms of what members and clients need, with balancing a team who had a goal in mind and how to focus that goal in an ever-shifting climate that we work in. (Respondent 6, 2020)

So, I was almost like how do you do this? It is not like anyone has had any practice on this, it's not like 'in my previous role there was a lockdown and we couldn't work so I have got experience on what to do in this situation.' (Respondent 7, 2020)

The research participants made reference to constant change within the environment, essentially having to make decisions and engage with an environment that was dynamic and unpredictable.

I mean it has changed constantly, and that has been the biggest thing from a leadership perspective in [business reference], was understanding how to lead while the ground beneath you is changing constantly. (Respondent 6, 2020)

With the increasing uncertainty in the environment, a number of the middle management leaders attempted to create autonomy for their team members, essentially empowering them to react accordingly while aligned to a central strategy. This enabled their teams to operationally engage as they saw fit in order to manage the various pressures.

What I tried to do was try to give people some level of autonomy, because when you are in states of change most leaders unconsciously micromanage and want to control, but in actual fact that further perpetuates the threat state you are driving then, because when you micromanage and control, people feel like you don't trust them to deliver on or execute the task that they are required to do. So, within the autonomy we just need to figure out what are the expectations of what good and bad is, or good and not so good, and how can we support one another to be as good as possible shall I say? (Respondent 3, 2020)

I like to kind of prevent something becoming a problem by being very aware of what... and I kind of want to stress this, it is not like micro-managing kind of thing; I don't get involved in what you are doing and how you are doing it, unless there is a problem, or you ask me for my help. (Respondent 4, 2020)

You have got to try and understand although you may not have sight of everything that happens with every individual under your wing, you have got to try and sort of delegate properly and try and keep a handle on the people that matter and the resources that matter. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Additionally, the participants made specific reference to letting go, releasing control or empowering their teams to behave and react as required based on the environment.

In a sense that you do have to release a little bit of control to the right people in the organisation. (Respondent 5, 2020)

I have learnt to let go a little bit more in the sense I know I can do it, but I want you to do it and if you need help, I will help you and I will show you how and what the steps are so you can learn from me. (Respondent 7, 2020)

I like to give my teams the freedom to discover their jobs for themselves as well, because even though we have targets we need to meet, it doesn't mean the way that I do it will work for everyone. (Respondent 6, 2020)

5.3.5 Leadership Approach: People vs Task Focused Approach

A strong theme across the interviews was a change in the middle managers' approach to leading. Numerous managers referenced themselves as naturally favouring a task style of leadership that was more outcomes- or results-focused than people-focused.

And it wasn't an adversarial type conversation, it was if this is that uncomfortable for you, if the position that we are in at the moment is that uncomfortable for you, you need to go somewhere else because you are not going to get fulfilment doing this. (Respondent 2, 2020)

I don't suffer fools lightly and I like to get things done and I don't really accept mediocrity. So, I have pretty high standards from my team point of view there. (Respondent 1, 2020)

Look I think I can be quite a hardnosed person; I think for you and I maybe it is our background, maybe it is a boarding school thing and maybe it is just being an A type individual, but I am not very empathetic at the best of times. (Respondent 3, 2020)

This approach to facing the extreme context seemed to 'soften' and adopt a more people-focused approach, often placing the individual's health and wellbeing above the required business results.

But if you are at a softer level, if you can understand 'okay, I have really been pushing this guy for the last while and I can understand why I am not getting the quality that I am used to getting from that person' then don't keep hammering at it; you are just going to exacerbate your problems. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Probably a lot more feminine in terms of skills, like soft skills, like more feminine approach rather than this hard approach. (Respondent 1)

So, the change coming at my people was like at a rapid pace! So ja, it was [leadership approach] empathetic, patient and compassionate and a bit feminine, that softer side. (Respondent 2, 2020)

So I think I became more empathetic than I have ever been, even if it didn't show, but when people would do things and then they would rush to do them and then do something wrong, I would instead of phoning them and going 'What are you doing?' I would just more take on a coaching approach and kind of go 'Listen I noticed that you send something, what was the reason for doing that so rapidly? Just be conscious of what you did. Let's think about how in the future if that occurs, we can look at a different approach and what it would like in that approach.' (Respondent 3, 2020)

Empathy as a leader or manager dealing with people caught up within these extreme contexts was a strong focal area across the research project. This specific reference is to leadership empathy or an acknowledgement from a leader within the participant group that their specific management or leadership approach needed to be deeply considered, specifically with the effect of the extreme context in mind.

So, if people show up badly I kind of come down quite hard and then I have to catch myself and say 'Well we are in unprecedented times of change where people are trying to really just do their best, give them a little bit more leeway and acknowledge where they find themselves and then support them on that. (Respondent 2, 2020)

So, kind of take a step back and just acknowledge where they are because no one was functioning in their best space you know, we talk of prefrontal cortex, your conscious brain and your limbic system, your unconscious brain – they are all functioning on auto pilot, because they are in such states of threat. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Additionally, it seemed based on the physical barriers created between the team, management of elements like teamwork, engagement and motivation became more difficult for leaders who began to feel disconnected from their teams.

And that part was very difficult, keep them motivated while also understanding that you need to be more flexible because there is a lot more personal stuff that now contributes to maybe taking you away from your daily life and work as well. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Ja, no, at the start it was very difficult, very frustrating when somebody doesn't have connectivity as an example, or suddenly they are sick or a relative is sick and it just completely destroys any momentum that you had – and you have to understand it, but it is also frustrating at the same time. (Respondent 4, 2020)

A more empathetic and flexible approach to team management provided the context that the participants needed to take a step back and understand the current environment in which their teams were operating and additionally the effect that environment and its pressures were having on their team members. Some of the participants, however, did reference a blurring of the lines between their professional and personal lives across their teams, taking a more human-centric approach to leading.

I would say definitely, particularly in terms of more of a personal level, just I think being more aware of people's personal circumstances. I think that has been an eye opener. I think it is a difficult one though because you don't want to blur those lines too much because it can get... you know you are still there in a professional capacity. (Respondent 10, 2020)

So, I was more on the side of saying 'Okay we are in this thing together now, let's help each other and don't stress too much, we will get past this.' (Respondent 8, 2020)

I would visit stores, the heads of operation would sit in stores, we would go out to some stores and go and visit them, with our certificates, and take them a chocolate or bring them a cup of coffee or something like that. We would do things like that, which showed 'we are in this together' – we kept on saying that – 'We are in this together.' (Respondent 9, 2020)

Often these leaders were required to change their approach, attempting to be more authentically empathetic and cognisant of the difficulties their teams were facing. Furthermore, certain leaders attempted to further drive a collaboration and team togetherness narrative, attempting to destroy any hierarchical structure within their businesses and demonstrating, through an empathetic approach to leading, that everyone was facing these challenges and difficulties together.

Ja, no, at the start it was very difficult, very frustrating when somebody doesn't have connectivity as an example, or suddenly they are sick or a relative is sick and it just completely destroys any momentum that you had – and you have to understand it, but it is also frustrating at the same time. (Respondent 4, 2020)

I mean certain aspects around your personal view on something, to say 'hey I am doing this, we're in lockdown, if I can do this, why can't you' but then it is not always as black and white as that, it is understanding 'okay, does this person have a family, where are the family from, what is a factor that could be negating it, has there been someone sick, do we know how they are coping being in a lockdown, have you spoken to them around how they are feeling?' It is not always as black and white as you think it may be, it's understanding who that person is and then again, adapting your style of leadership to what their requirements may be. (Respondent 4, 2020)

You are really working more intensely with people's lives than you have in the past. So, my management style did change in that sense that I became more aware of sensitivities that my team might have, but it has also allowed me to be more straightforward with them, to in the same breath tell them 'This isn't right, this needs to improve, why is it like this, why is it like that?' And also challenge them more in this case. And then also to throw things back at them and say, 'Why is it like this, why do you think this?' I think in general my style remained the same but small tweaks needed to be made during this time. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Ultimately, leaders were required to acknowledge that the environment in which their teams were operating were challenging, that every team member was facing their own challenges in their own ways and therefore each team member required management or understanding with reference to their own situation and that this approach required a level of empathetic leadership that was a new behaviour for the research participants.

I think it would be a good dose of empathy, to put yourself in people's shoes and understand how are they experiencing this entire situation at the moment, what are things like. (Respondent 3, 2020)

I would say 'Look guys, how are you feeling?' And I think because we have developed that level of trust over the last 2 ½ years that I have been there, particularly with that one multi engagement, I think the guys felt a bit more comfortable to speak their minds and let me know how they were doing. And it was if you needed a day you could have a day! (Respondent 11, 2020)

So, for me I did not fall back on that transactional, but it was still required of higher management, they required us to do these things. So I kind of just said 'Look guys, let's do this thing, boom, let's submit our time sheets, activity sheets, send them to me, I will help you with this stuff, but don't worry too much about it. We are not examining anybody here, don't feel threatened.' So, me personally, my style of leadership must have been more supportive really, being the big daddy, the big brother again. (Respondent 8, 2020)

As more certainty has returned to the environment however, this leadership approach seemed to be returning to the task-focused approach with numerous participants making reference to focusing on the future, on doing what needs to be done to achieve success and on driving the team forward.

You know we have a target to hit and if you decide you want to sit at home and not hit your activity metrics or targets then you are not going to get your salary back, and actually from a sales point of view we are the ones carrying this business. (Respondent 1, 2020)

*'Okay, the time for games is over, lockdown is finished, let's look forward, we have done all the hard stuff, let's look forward now and it is in your hands to get our s**t together to make sure that the company survives.' (Respondent 3, 2020)*

Don't you dare feel sorry for yourself because you are not alone; there are people who have it far, far worse, there are people that have it better, but you are not alone. (Respondent 2, 2020)

There is a lot more clarity, kind of like the clouds have parted and the clients are now going well we are in a fluid state, the world doesn't stop, things we needed to do as a business and things that we did well or things that we need to improve upon still need to occur and take place. (Respondent 6, 2020)

This oscillation between task- or people-focused approaches however does seem to be an approach that has worked for the participants as the various leaders reference the need to travel along the spectrum based on their tasks, teams and requirements.

So again, there was a rally cry that needed to happen and there was also a mix... and like a mix of a tough but sincere and gentle approach. (Respondent 2, 2020)

And where I see opportunities to push somebody a bit harder so they can develop and maybe become even better at what they do, I get a bit more involved, where I see people maybe lagging behind and struggling I get more involved depending on how much I see an issue and so on. (Respondent 4, 2020)

5.3.6 Question 1: Results Summary

Within the sampled participants, it becomes clear that the ability for leaders to make sense of the changes within their environment and process those changes in order to communicate them to their team members in a clear and concise manner was key. Additionally, leaders were required to communicate as often and as transparently as possible, helping their team members both make sense of the environment and challenges they faced while simultaneously helping those team members understand what those changes to the environment meant for the firm and the team practically. Additionally, leaders were required to provide additional autonomy to their teams, allowing their teams the freedom to act and react accordingly to the changing environment while maintaining a focus on a central direction strategically.

Furthermore, and in order to successfully navigate these changes and the challenges posed by the extreme context, leaders were required to soften their leadership approach, assuming a more people-centric focus over a task orientated one and focussing on the individual needs of each team member in an authentic and open way. They were required to make a cognitive decision to attempt to connect more deeply with their team members and to understand at a human level the challenges they faced in their personal and professional lives. Notably, the data does then demonstrate a reversion of that focus away from the people-centric approach towards a more task focused one as the uncertainty and unknowns within the system dissipate, demonstrating that perhaps an oscillation within a leadership approach is required when facing changes in context.

5.4 Results: Research Question 2

How might the required leadership response shift across the periods that precede, during and following the extreme contexts when managing the various strategic and operational changes required by the firm?

As highlighted in Chapter 3 of this research report, further exploration is required in terms of understanding how leaders are able to manage the strategic and operational shifts

required when facing extreme contexts. The research questions surrounding the various stages of the extreme events that ultimately delivered an extreme context sought to understand and explore the various approaches used by middle management to interpret the leadership response changes required throughout the organisation while keeping the organisation operational. Additionally, Table 6 provides a brief summary of the identified key leadership response shifts noted by the participants when leading within an extreme context.

Question 2: How might the required leadership response shift across the periods that precede, during and following the extreme contexts when managing the various strategic and operational changes required by the firm?	
Leadership Response Shift	Summary
Strategic Shift	The division between long and short-term strategic intent became a major focus for leaders as the middle management participants focused on short terms immediate wins while the executive leadership were more focused on the long-term positioning of the firm.
Operational Shift	Future system efficiency, the introduction of systems and processes and streamlining of existing processes became a major operational focus for the firms as leaders attempted to use the extreme context to make the firms more efficient.
Leadership Shift	Leadership shifts towards a more empathetic style of leadership were evident as middle managers became aware of the stress and strain their teams faced and adjusted their leadership approach accordingly.

Table 6: Question 2 - Brief Response Summary

5.4.1 Strategic and Operational Shifts

With so much uncertainty in the system and the environment constantly shifting, the ability for leaders to focus on the strategic and operational positioning of their firms became incredibly challenging. With that in mind, leaders began to break up their focus to consider both short-term and long-term views and behave accordingly.

Things were changing at some stage like daily, you know we would have daily financial and revenue discussions about where we were at with sales, to see if we were tracking against the adjusted targets and budgets. So, the change was every day, and sometimes ja, it definitely changed, and definitely conscious! (Respondent 9, 2020)

Additionally, as the environment was shifting and the strategic and operational focus was changing, there was a need to ensure the middle management team were able to articulate and communicate the business focus shift to their teams on the ground, so everyone remained aligned and connected.

'Things have changed, the world has changed,' and also to talk to people about the world has changed and you work for a company and the company has certain viewpoint of it, and when you are an employee of a company that should be ... we should all speak in the same voice basically. (Respondent 7, 2020)

The leaders within the study seemed predominately focused on the implementation of new systems, processes and plans while linking the senior leadership to the rest of the business, providing a conduit to what was happening on the ground. Middle managers within the sample began to utilise their time to understand and address the internal systems and process issues within their firms. They proactively sought to address issues that were either well known but never a priority, or that had become obvious based on the challenges that were being faced by the firm at the time.

So we had a lot of inefficiencies in the business and I kind of felt that it was an opportunity to take the foot of the gas of chasing revenue – which most sales organisations and departments do – and take a break for a while, re-strategize and figure out what we are going to do for the future. (Respondent 1, 2020)

We use a lot of Excel sheets, very, very detailed, updating them is time consuming, and so that is where I am looking now, is to streamline that whole implementation so it almost becomes automated, where the people who are involved in implementation can actually free up more time to support sales and actually sell themselves, because they know our content so well, and our solutions. (Respondent 3, 2020)

...relook at all processes, relook at all people, relook at all departments, relook at systems – everything, and just make ourselves leaner, meaner, and better processes. (Respondent 1, 2020)

This thing took us and shook us and said, 'Put some glasses on and have a look at your business properly, line by line' and it has shown where these inefficiencies are and where low hanging fruits are – that we can just quickly change around and make a difference. (Respondent 9, 2020)

Furthermore, a number of these focal areas have added a meaningful benefit to the firms in which they have been implemented, with a number of the participants referencing implemented processes and systems that will remain for the foreseeable future.

I mean reporting wise! Geez! I mean for the first time; at any given day I can tell you exactly how much cash was collected yesterday and how much is still outstanding etc. It is not that we couldn't tell it, we just weren't looking at it at that sort of granular detail and level. We started doing that because of COVID and it has brought greater alignment. (Respondent 9, 2020)

Additionally, some of the middle managers within the study have taken this shock to their firms as an opportunity to sense-check their firm's actions and question why certain processes and systems operate the way they do. Furthermore, and by providing these managers a revised perspective of their firms, new ways of engaging across their firms seem to be in development or review.

I think what has happened is that business in itself, the mindset that we have had – and I am talking broadly, not just our company, and I am talking EXCO level, board member level, I think it really shook us to say this virus, obviously we look at how we do things, but really look at how we do things – but not just how, but why we do things you know? And how that affects the business, be it our buildings, our staff, our clients, our processes – I think that has fundamentally shifted for me, it's become more of the how – yes, that is important – but why do we do things, and is it the best way of doing things? (Respondent 6, 2020)

This continuous change within the environment however required a dual focus from the leadership on both the immediate short-term requirements and the longer-term strategic positioning.

5.4.1.1 Short-term Strategy Focus

Short-term strategy and focusing on small wins were where most of the participants focused their energy as the environment continued to shift and the complexity within the environment began to expand. This allowed the middle managers the ability to retain as much focus as possible on the variables within their control and continue to drive their teams to produce work for their existing clients.

It is really short-term goals, driving short-term goals the whole time. So, my goal has completely changed. (Respondent 6, 2020)

The same thing with, you know, delivering on clients, deliverables, getting stuff done for them – I think a big thing for me was saying ultimately that is still what I am working towards, that is what I need to achieve, I can't disappoint and let them down, there is a contract that has been agreed to between us and them, so how do I keep the ball rolling? So, keeping that firmly in mind, but being flexible enough and changing what needs to change – and sticking to routines that work where they do work. (Respondent 11, 2020)

Short-term strategy sessions were frequently held, with a constant dialogue and review of the forces at play within the operating environment. Middle managers focused on ensuring these strategy sessions were attended by team members, and contributions from across the teams were made based on the team's experience on the ground. This allowed the middle managers the opportunity to leverage off the team's experience and manage the complexity within the dynamic environment.

I mean this week we have had three strategy sessions for next year. We have done like a short-term – a six months, how we generate as much revenue from now until March – and then for the next 18 months. (Respondent 3, 2020)

We also developed for my specific team, we put together a strategy meeting, where it was just specifically the team, which did not include directors, because we wanted it to be a bit more of an open platform for individuals to speak, really where we felt our team was going strategically, you know innovative ideas was discussed and how we could direct the focus of our team, and then include directors once we have alignment, because you don't need to get the directors involved until you have a clear... once the team is all on board. (Respondent 10, 2020)

Additionally, leaders discussing short-term strategy and handling concerns and queries from their teams focused on the unanswerable questions and ongoing uncertainty and complexity within the market. The middle managers focused on short-term objectives within their teams by driving a narrative that focused on the variables that were controllable.

Focus on the now, focus on your deals, focus on what you can control – and don't focus too much on the uncontrollable because that will just side-track you completely. (Respondent 6, 2020)

So, give them things that they can control so they can focus on that and kind of give themselves these milestones to achieve. (Respondent 7, 2020)

So instead of letting the people wonder about 500 million things, let's just focus on that small step in front of us you know, and then let's get through that. So, I think that's... I mean the words are evolving as I am speaking but I think that is really where the focus is, it is really about the short-term gains I can almost say and getting that energy back into that system. (Respondent 8, 2020)

5.4.1.2 Long-term Strategy Focus

The long-term strategy for the various firms across the sample participants remained driven by the senior leadership team. Although the middle management were included and aware of what was happening in terms of the longer-term strategy, it seems the middle management participants' focus remained on the immediate, more operationally relevant and urgent matters the business was facing.

I think businesses have got to be broken up in a way that allows effective lines of communication from all departments to filter back up, because ultimately there are only a select few from a strategic perspective, from a cultural perspective, a few individuals who have really got a say in where they are heading, in where the organisation is heading and what the ultimate goal and strategy is going forward – they have got the bigger picture. (Respondent 5, 2020)

That said however, all of the participants were acutely aware that a dual strategic focus was required and while operationally the short-term strategy needed to focus on operating within the challenging environment, a longer-term strategy needed to consider where the business was going to position itself.

You know, you have to be tactical because you need to have that pot cooking still at the same time, or the bees need to still make the honey, but then on the other side you also need to decide where are we going to put the beehive here. (Respondent 8, 2020)

5.4.2 Leadership Shift

Based on the feedback received from the participants, there is little doubt that the experience they have been through with their teams has shifted their approach to leadership. As discussed, a more professional and task-focused relationship seemed to exist throughout the teams. Having experienced an extreme context together, there does seem to be a shift towards a more people-centric approach as the lines blurred between professional and personal lives for both leaders and followers.

So there was a hell of a lot of compassion from that point of view, and right at the beginning it was like 'okay, how do we save the business, monetarily wise, and look after our staff, because we don't know how long this is going to be for.' (Respondent 1, 2020)

From a management perspective I think it has been quite nice in a sense to experience something like this because it brings people closer together, especially almost breaking an organisation up into smaller siloes, you get to understand people's needs a little bit better, you get to know people a little bit better and you open up lines of communication – which I think was a little lacking. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Managers seemed to focus less on the transactional relationship within their teams and focused predominately on the personal ones, taking the approach to check in with their team members, ask about their health and wellness, engage around their families and their wellbeing.

'What are you dealing with at home? Have you got three children at home? Do they need to be fed every three hours or do you have an elderly sick mother at home that you are taking care of, that possibly is affecting your workflow negatively, and challenges logistically?' So, I think from a management perspective it is almost down to understanding people a little bit better, understanding the challenges that they face – which is good. (Respondent 4, 2020)

However, the managers remained acutely aware that a focus was still required on the more task driven elements and that the business was still required to deliver results. With that in mind, some of the participants did feel the need to remind the researcher that while they cared about their staff and wanted to be as empathetic as

possible, results were still required to ensure the sustainability of the business in the long term.

I think personally is that once again, with change, there becomes a lot of ambiguity and a lot of fluffiness in the system, and once again we need to come together and re-align, re-purpose and really focus on what is the common ground that we all have in relation to achieving our goals for the next 18 months. And hopefully everyone buys into it and they are clear around what that looks like, so we can kind of move forward. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Furthermore, the mindset of these middle managers was clearly evidenced by their focus on linking the strategic and operational elements of their firms, providing insight into their focus as their firms stabilise following this environmental shock.

But you will never get that unless you make that link between the execution part and the thinking strategy part, and I sometimes think some businesses, given whatever the skills set in that room, the age of the business, etc, they get the strategy right but the execution isn't a fail, but it is not as good as it could be operationally as an example. (Respondent 9, 2020)

5.4.3 Question 2: Results Summary

The results gathered for Question 2 provides us insight into the leadership changes the research participants were required to make in terms of their leadership behaviour in both the short term and long term within their firms, specifically through a strategic or operational lens. Additionally, and perhaps more surprisingly however was the change required within their leadership approach to their team members. Here a shift is evident with a focus on the individuals within their teams as opposed to tasks that required completion, demonstrating the shift required when facing an extreme context away from achievement of goals and towards the individuals within a team.

5.5 Results: Research Question 3

How did leaders ensure their teams continued to operate successfully while facing an extreme context?

While the correct leadership response is required when facing uncertain, complex and dynamic environments, it is ultimately the team's response to specific tasks or challenges that will dictate whether a team can produce the outcomes necessary to be considered

effective or successful. This research question sought to explore what leadership behaviours would facilitate successful team integration and operation within an extreme context. The below behaviours from the participants within the research project were the most dominant focal points within this line of questioning. Additionally, Table 7 provides a brief summary of the identified focal areas noted by the participants when attempting to keep their teams operating successfully within an extreme context.

Question 3: How did leaders ensure their teams continued to operate successfully while facing an extreme context?	
Team Behaviour	Summary
Collaboration, Communication and Problem Solving	A central focus on continued engagement and communication with the team, specifically focussed on collaborative group problem solving kept teams engaged and focused.
Strong Team Culture	Teams with a strong sense of purpose built on solid trust elements combined with a culture that encouraged open discussion, collaboration and empathy towards one another fared well when facing an extreme context.
Human Capital Management	Leaders were required to actively manage their team members in order to ensure that team members were in the right state of mind, were physically and mentally well and were able to give of their best when required.

Table 7: Question 3 - Brief Response Summary

5.5.1 Team Behaviour: Collaboration, Communication and Problem Solving

While the research participants referenced the need to be collaborative in the way in which they lead their teams as a required leadership response to extreme contexts, a strong collaborative approach in terms of internal interaction within the team was required to drive team engagement and manage the various challenges presented within an extreme context. This was a dominant discussion point that was uncovered when conversing with the research participants about how to create an environment for team success within extreme contexts.

Participants did reference the distance between their team members and the inability to have everyone in one room, brainstorming or instantly available as a major obstacle. Having worked in culturally collaborative teams before, the distance suddenly created a barrier to fluid collaboration which presented a major challenge to a large number of the research participants.

I was grateful for prior to lockdown and having people in a room, you can quickly in 15 seconds get inputs from the whole team on a problem that you are facing. Because the way that we used to work is we sit in one room

And a friend of mine terms it the water cooler conversations. I mean I don't think anybody really has a water cooler anymore these days, they all just drink still waters or from bottles or whatever, but that aspect of collaboration is still missing for me. (Respondent 4, 2020)

And it is insane how much that means, just having that ... I almost want to say that amount of thinking power at your fingertips, whereas these days it is just not possible, or for me it seems that it is not possible. (Respondent 4, 2020)

This inability to collaborate can be linked to the team culture aspect highlighted below. Anecdotally, based on discussions with the participants, had a team been collaborative (culturally in terms of the way they engaged and logistically based on the tools they utilised) throughout their daily work then the impact of distance on their ability to collaborate was impacted only marginally.

When problem solving, some of the research participants took the opportunity to step outside of their comfort zones and engage their teams collaboratively within areas that were otherwise not a focus area or specialty for their team members with varying degrees of success, helping out where additional focus was needed.

That is how I found we worked quite well. We kind of all stepped out of our lanes and have all helped out where we are maybe not entirely comfortable, but realise that it goes around as well. (Respondent 2, 2020)

And that is why I think as a team there has got to be a level of cohesion between your team, where guys are able to flex and to pick up the work load and allow people to take a bit of a back seat when they are burning out. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Furthermore, some firms even successfully managed to allocate resources to projects that required additional attention collaboratively, instituting systems that allowed colleagues in other teams to provide additional support should they have some capacity.

Another thing that we implemented during lockdown was around forecasting three weeks in advance your workload in terms of billable hours, and I think that was quite a nice way of also sharing workload and making sure that the team is always as busy as they possibly can be, so that no one is left behind. So because on that weekly call we all forecast our hours, and then when someone goes like 'I have the capacity to support' you therefore know then that person will perhaps support during the week and the onus is on you as a manager to also... well it is both, top down and bottom up, to reach out respectively to get work. (Respondent 10, 2020)

Additionally, a major focus for creating successful team interaction was continuous team communication, driven by the need to internally collaborate. This required various new communication channels based on the operating environment in which teams were engaging. While some leaders were uncertain whether the increased communication aided in the information flow between the team members and themselves, there was little doubt amongst the participants that additional communication was needed given the dynamism of the environment.

Again, within a structure or framework, as long as the communication is happening within that time, it just creates a clear path for everyone, and everyone is working together. (Respondent 8, 2020)

So, lines of communication are paramount, and from my perspective I think it has been nice to have a little bit more... I felt like a little bit more of control in having those communication lines and me being able to talk to the teams daily and understand where their challenges lie. (Respondent 5, 2020)

All of the participants referenced communicating more during the extreme context than previously, aided by technology and further reinforced by already established ways of working in some instances.

So actually had a lot more engagement than we had before! Because you know my sales team is all over the country, and you would see them very rarely, but now we catch up on (Microsoft) Teams a lot more, and actually what I did do is instead of physical store visits to go and get orders, we changed it to a telephone call cycle. (Respondent 1, 2020)

And it almost forced us to engage a little bit more, more regularly, as opposed to being in the office and the likes. (Respondent 5, 2020)

So, it has brought about a better line of communication, a more regular line of communication which we didn't have previously. And I find that is quite effective. (Respondent 10, 2020)

Some participants did question whether the ongoing and continued communication was beneficial and productive, and still suggested that meeting face-to-face was more beneficial and more powerful, circling back to the human-centric side of team work.

And it forced us to engage with each other a lot more, whether it was more beneficial than being face to face I can't say for certain, I still believe a face to face interaction or meeting amongst the team was better had, but it forced us to do it and almost on a regular basis, every morning at 8 o'clock we would sit with our particular teams and discuss what was going to happen for the day, discuss what needed to be done, and then if you had to jump on a call in the afternoon you would after things cooled down. (Respondent 5, 2020)

5.5.2 Team Behaviour: Strong Team Culture

A strong company culture built around solid firm values and clear team expectations was a driving factor when considering how to best manage teams within an extreme context. Teams that fared well, according to the participants, were the teams that had a strong team culture prior to the extreme context. Managers had spent time developing and cultivating the team's culture and the relationships within the team and this team culture seemed to form the nucleus towards which the team turned when they faced the challenging environments created within the extreme context.

As a team we already had quite a good team structure and team unity, so to carry that forward and to empower the team members to become teachers towards each other and also as we would grow as a team, to help them transferring their skills to new guys and just opening new buildings and having a lot of fun with it. (Respondent 6, 2020)

I think one of the key things particularly for myself is that I know I am part of a company that cares, the culture is supportive and it holds you accountable, plus the value that we are trying to drive is bigger than myself, and is something that I am just extremely passionate about, and I don't think I could have done it if I wasn't part of like something that I really believed in, and I think that is extremely important for a manager or a leader to really believe in the purpose that they are driving through their organisations. (Respondent 10, 2020)

I had and still have utmost faith in the team, that they would take care of business and they wouldn't sort of muck around or waste time or let things slip. (Respondent 11, 2020)

Additionally, numerous teams came together, accepting and acknowledging that everyone was facing this challenge together, the extreme context acting as a central challenge to be faced together, as one team, one firm. That challenge formed a rallying cry which enabled tough decisions to be faced together as one single unit.

Right from the beginning, that everyone from the tea lady to the CEO was like 'We are in this together.' There was no... ja, it was all just as one. (Respondent 1, 2020)

And we decided to cut salaries, probably into like month two of the lockdown, and everybody understood, even the people where it would completely break them, understood. (Respondent 1, 2020)

So, the people that answered the rally cry got excited and it was okay cool, we are all going to do this. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Managers also referenced the need to lead by example, to consciously consider their behaviour as managers, to make sure they were present, physically, emotionally and mentally whenever engaging their team and ensuring they were never on 'auto-pilot' when dealing with their team members.

Because for me no one was telling me I have to get dressed every day for work, no one was telling me I had to do the extra work, no one was telling me... so it wasn't my management team telling me to do that so I trickled it down, it became a personal thing for me. So, a personal sense of pride and it depends on your team and understanding your team. (Respondent 6, 2020)

I really enjoyed that I think our leadership, my senior managers and senior team, they really get stuck in, and I think that really sets the tone for the rest of the team in terms of expectations. It is not as if they just like tell us to get stuck in, they are in the thick of it as well, and those okes worked extremely, extremely hard. (Respondent 11, 2020)

5.5.3 People Management: Human Capital Management

When faced with an extreme context, team members will face physical, emotional, psychological and material threats. Managers made reference to these threats and the response behaviour their teams used to counter those threats across every interview.

In states of change where there is a lack of certainty, you can't predict what the future will be, you are unsure about personal wellbeing, personal financial wellbeing, colleagues you work with daily and obviously have relationships with – for them – what it does in the brain is it creates a threat state, so people are always on edge, and a ripple effect of that is they are always trying to prove their worth, show their value, show up, be exceptional and it's go, go, go and it's a million miles an hour kind of execution. (Respondent 3, 2020)

And so, it was just the pace was extremely fast. I remembered having meetings over weekends, strategy meetings from early Saturday morning to late on Saturday afternoon and Sundays, late evening meetings following the president's announcements for new updates, what are we going to do? (Respondent 9, 2020)

I can't even think about what we actually did, it was just working pretty much flat out for those two months, even into June, but specifically April/May, it was working on weekends, working on public holidays and really trying to just get [company name] through this time and the details of what we needed to do. But that was quite hectic! (Respondent 11, 2020)

Managers made specific reference to having to manage their teams away from burn-out or stress. A central focal point developed around individual managers and team member burn-out, with individuals being unable to turn off and walk away from their jobs.

And I have realised the importance – and we alluded to it earlier – is you have got to manage that, we have learnt, and it is something I am trying to manage myself and with my team is to have that 'shut the laptop' time, whenever it is, whenever it is in your day, I think it is managing against output as opposed to hours is the important thing now. (Respondent 2, 2020)

'Listen, I can hear you are not in it at the moment, I can hear you're struggling' and obviously you have to look at the context, like if you know the guy has been doing 12 hour shifts for the last three weeks, then acknowledge that and put on the brakes on it there and then, because you are only going to lose if you keep loading the truck, because you are not going to get. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Middle managers were additionally required to manage themselves in terms of the expending of their own human capital, with numerous mentions made of complete failure, poor decision making and personal burn-out.

Like keen, get my teeth stuck in, work, work, work, work – 'doof' – fall over. Too much. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Personally, I got to a point where I worked myself into a hole, and there was actually a proposal that we submitted that I had completely blown out, I messed it up, and the whole team had to work like 24 hours just to fix my mistake. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Managers began to see behaviour that was out of character for their team members and were required to step in and manage the creative capital produced by their team members, forcing their team members to switch off and take a break in order to save them from themselves.

And I realised that people weren't showing up at their best, they were more emotionally volatile, they were having outbursts, they were quick to action things with more errors than I had seen previously – and that is just because they wanted to show up and do things in the best way possible, and to a large extent speed in execution was what they deemed a sound metric for success, particularly in a client and customer-focused business. (Respondent 3, 2020)

You know the Monday morning, we have a slew of Monday morning calls, and you can from like that first 8 o'clock meeting on Monday you can tell who is hot and who is not. And you then have got to realise, you have got to properly acknowledge it, and not take a hard line approach of 'you know what, I am actually just going to carry on asking this person to do these things' because you are going to put the business at risk if you do that because the output that you are going to get from that person is not going to be at a level of quality that you are used to getting from them, because they are just not there. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Mental and physical health and wellbeing of both the managers themselves and their team members was a major focal area for the managers when discussing how to successfully facilitate positive team engagement within an extreme context.

I think it has just made it more forefront is this mental health wellbeing aspect, around burn-out, what is actually now acceptable in terms of productivity because as we move out of this phase three or into phase four, people's lives start to happen again and you can't expect them always to be by their laptop from 7 till 6, and I think it is really important to make sure that you are managing people's burn-out, your own burn-out. (Respondent 10, 2020)

5.5.4 Question 3: Results Summary

The results surrounding Question 3 provides insight into the focal areas for middle management leaders attempting to keep their teams aligned and working towards a common goal while facing an extreme context. Evident within the feedback is the need for a team to have an existing and well-established culture at its core that provides the team members the comfort, trust and safety to operate as required while being supported as needed. Additionally, leaders utilised their team as a network to group solve problems through collaboration efforts driven by constant communication.

Furthermore, question 3 provides additional insight into the more people-centric approach undertaken by middle managers who were required to understand the pressure their teams were under and ultimately were required to assume a more empathetic approach to their leadership in order to adequately manage their team members away from burn out.

5.6 Results: Research Question 4

How should leaders mentally make sense of the environment and ultimately retain personal leadership effectiveness while facing an extreme context?

Given the global and local shockwaves created across every sector by the COVID-19 pandemic and seismic shifts people experienced within their industries, their businesses and the way their teams were required to operate, the researcher wanted to understand how each individual leader was making sense of their own individual environment and simultaneously ensuring they were maintaining leadership effectiveness throughout an extreme context. The below listed themes were evident across the participants, each providing some insight into the experience of leaders within this extreme context as individuals as well as leaders. Additionally, Table 8 below provides a brief summary of the identified focal areas noted by the participants when attempting make sense of their own environment and retain personal leadership effectiveness when facing an extreme context.

Question 4: How should leaders mentally make sense of the environment and ultimately retain personal leadership effectiveness while facing an extreme context?	
Individual Behaviour	Summary
Adaptability	Leaders were required to retain an open mind, to welcome change and to remain open to changing their expectations or adapting the way in which they did things to succeed.
Control and Release	Leaders were required to switch between releasing control of their teams and taking control back in order to retain the focus of the team where necessary but simultaneously to allow the team the autonomy to act individually.
Self-empathy	Leaders were required to be empathetic towards themselves and demonstrate more self-care. This element was something raised as lacking by most of the participants.
Knowledge Sharing	Leaders were required to utilise their teams and their networks to share as much information as possible. This covered both the sharing of ideas as well as the sharing of information.
Perspective and Positivity	Leaders were required to retain their perspective about what was happening and their positivity simultaneously, ensuring that they were rising to meet the challenges before them through a positive lens.

Table 8: Question 4 – Brief Response Summary

5.6.1 Individual Behaviour: Adaptability

The participants within the research project made reference to the need to adapt as leaders, as a team and as a business throughout the interviews, often circling back to the requirement for everyone to remain fluid and adaptable throughout the entire period.

I needed to adapt; I think everyone needed to adapt the way that they were managing. (Respondent 4, 2020)

In terms of my leadership, it has been the same, but I have had to pick up some traits and I think adaptability has been one of the biggest ones. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Additionally, the research participants made reference to their paradigms shifting and changing and the need and willingness they needed to have to ask for help or admit when they didn't know what to do or what was required.

How do I shift? Okay, I have to work in a new team – stay positive, adapt, work with that person. Okay, this is your new role, how do you stay positive and work in it and adapt. Okay, I am not quite sure how to frame that, let me ask someone who can help me frame it in a way where my leadership and positivity keeps going but I can adapt on certain aspects to that. (Respondent 6, 2020)

When questioned further about how an individual remains adaptable or open to change, the participants often referenced both a growth mindset as well as being positive or continuing to find the upside of tough situations.

I think adaptability as a team has happened within from a [business name] perspective and I think it was just because people were able to stay positive quite a bit. So, if you can stay positive you can always find a positive outcome to something else, which means to find your positive outcome you have to adapt. (Respondent 7, 2020)

I think that is part of our business, there has been so much change, so many ups and downs, but if you stay positive and adapt and change you can get through it, you can move forward. (Respondent 6, 2020)

A number of the participants were required, based on the shifting environment, to assume roles in which they had little exposure or experience. These participants made a conscious decision to make a strong attempt, to seek out information and to grow into the roles.

*I was like 'Oh s**t, this is a new domain I am stepping into, I also knew nothing about sales, it was a new domain I was stepping into and I thought well you know what I better wait to learn and actually doing it.' So, I had taken that approach and that was my personal decision. (Respondent 2, 2020)*

Look, one of the things we try and tell our clients are a lot of the things I have tried to embody and display, is Grow mindset principles, is with rapid amounts of change and with any change – whether foreseen or unforeseen – comes growth and opportunity to grow exponentially. And I think for me I have always tried to look at this as how can it help me improve and what can I learn from it and what can I take to get exponentially better? (Respondent 3, 2020)

Some of the participants even viewed the challenges they faced as an opportunity to drive efficiency into their businesses and teams, attempting to use the dynamic environment and the challenges they faced as a way to jump their businesses forward, grabbing more market share or releasing new products that would see them capitalise on the market fluctuations and unknowns.

We launched the e-commerce site that certainly wasn't going to save the business at R100 000 a month, that was just an opportunity for us to protect our brand. But everything that we did during lockdown was 'How do we come out of this to really hit the J curve?' (Respondent 1, 2020)

5.6.2 Individual Behaviour: Control and Release

With so much unknown information in the system and complexity at an all-time high given the uncertainty and volatility being experienced by their teams and their businesses, the research participants realised that they needed to both control what could be controlled and release what could not or should not be controlled as team leaders. A number of participants viewed themselves as a filter or valve that controlled the amount of autonomy within their teams and based on the feedback from senior leadership at the executive level surrounding the firm's strategy or the feedback from their team members on the ground aligned to operations, the participants would constrict or flood their own systems with information and autonomy.

What I tried to do was try to give people some level of autonomy, because when you are in states of change most leaders unconsciously micro-manage and want to control, but in actual fact that further perpetuates the threat state you are driving then, because when you micro manage and control, people feel like you don't trust them to deliver on or execute the task that they are required to do. So within the autonomy we just need to figure out what are the expectations of what good and bad is, or good and not so good, and how can we support one another to be as good as possible shall I say? (Respondent 3, 2020)

Put the guy there, make him feel happy, buffer all the worries in life and make sure that he just focuses. I am not withholding information, but all I am saying is focus and not to blame the management or pass on the risk, but to kind of buffer it a bit and give the fullest opportunity for that guy to flourish. (Respondent 8, 2020)

The participants would often urge their teams to take ownership of identified issues, pushing their teams to dig deeper, to find the relevant information and then solve the issue themselves. This empowering behaviour flooded the system with freedom of action for their teams, ensuring issues could be dealt with swiftly and as the team required.

'Take ownership of an issue. It's your issue to own, if it is in front of you, you own it.' And for me that is leadership, is picking up the reins wherever it is needed and then leading from the front. (Respondent 9, 2020)

And also then when I take a step back and I say 'Okay, you go and find out more about this, because this is healthy for you to do and understand because then you can educate the rest of us.' (Respondent 7, 2020)

For me it is extremely important for me to empower them but also to ensure that they are hungry enough to go and search for information themselves. So, I give them enough to get the brainwaves and everything going, so that they go 'Okay, I need to go and find out more.' (Respondent 7, 2020)

At times however, the leaders were also required to bring back levels of control to the system as their teams began to spread their focus and their resources. The leaders needed to identify when to step in and take back some of the autonomy they had provided to their teams.

Because if you give too much autonomy as I say there is mess and clutter, and we don't achieve the goal. So, it is just that kind of fine tuning, because I want everyone to believe in the approach and to buy into it, and then relentlessly pursue it. (Respondent 2, 2020)

What we then had to do was everyone was scattered and then was chaos, with everyone starting to do their own things and positioning their own solutions to a client, and we had to kind of... okay, we are all over the place, with this comes reward and with focus comes results, let's pick six to eight topics that we all know we can deliver well, and that we can position to clients being muffled and a bit clumsy in the language, and let's bring the delivery inhouse. (Respondent 3, 2020)

I think personally is that once again, with change, there becomes a lot of ambiguity and a lot of fluffiness in the system, and once again we need to come together and re-align, re-purpose and really focus on what is the common ground that we all have in relation to achieving our goals. (Respondent 3, 2020)

This control and release, however, was a balancing act for the participants as they needed to actively manage the autonomy, they provided their teams to ensure people didn't feel controlled but rather directed.

It almost felt like very forced you know that feedback and check ins, there was not that spontaneity and that freedom. All of a sudden, I think people felt literally boxed in. (Respondent 4, 2020)

5.6.3 Individual Behaviour: Self-empathy

As mentioned throughout this chapter, empathy as a leader, as a team member and as an individual has continued to remain a central theme when facing an extreme context. Within the context of remaining an effective leader however, this empathy or self-care towards oneself is also required. With the participants of this study required to be both supportive and caring towards their team while simultaneously managing the flow of information within the business and carrying the requirement from their business to maintain operational efficiency, an element of self-care and self-empathy was required but often neglected.

Numerous participants made reference to the strain this extreme context has placed on them personally, with numerous mentions of emotional exhaustion, burn-out or failure.

In states of change where there is a lack of certainty, you can't predict what the future will be, you are unsure about personal wellbeing, personal financial wellbeing, colleagues you work with daily and obviously have relationships with – for them – what it does in the brain is it creates a threat state, so people are always on edge, and a ripple effect of that is they are always trying to prove their worth, show their value, show up, be exceptional and it's go, go, go and it's a million miles an hour kind of execution. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Personally, I got to a point where I worked myself into a hole, and there was actually a proposal that we submitted that I had completely blown out, I messed it up, and the whole team had to work like 24 hours just to fix my mistake. (Respondent 2, 2020)

It was like 'I am just tired – I didn't go running tired, I can feel I am emotionally drained.' (Respondent 3, 2020)

Some participants did reference understanding that self-management and self-empathy was required on their part and further referenced how leaders were required to set an example to their team members, which needed to include the management of one's self.

I think in times like that, of uncertainty, people look to management and look to leaders as a sort of a guidance step, almost like a son or daughter looking to a father for advice, in a sense, and we didn't know, I mean as much as there are leaders and managers in an organisation, there were a lot of things that were out of our control, a lot of things that were out of everyone's control, a lot of uncertainty in the market. (Respondent 4, 2020)

5.6.4 Individual Behaviour: Knowledge Sharing

A strong theme emerged around the willingness and focus from the participants on the sharing of information across business units internally and across international boundaries for the participants, given the nature of the extreme context that was being experienced globally. Participants realised that while a large amount of the information they required to make decisions was missing based on a rapidly changing environment, they had larger networks available that could be tapped to help clarify and confirm the best course of action based on the decisions that had to be made.

Because honestly, no one knows! Like so much of what we have done, we just made up. And just like talking to each other, trying to find ideas, and whatever happened from within my team for example, it is not just me, I spoke to a lot of people to try to get to the point where you decide 'Is this the right thing?' And to also help them understand that that is the process that the company is going through, that everyone is just trying to talk to each other and find a solution, and that really did help with the change management. (Respondent 9, 2020)

And for me that sort of linking, and critical thinking, where you go and sit down and talk to staff and really get down to the detail. (Respondent 10, 2020)

One of the other things was around knowledge share because we are a consulting company, and the market is evolving very fast, and as well – even linked to COVID – I mean one of the directors in like Nairobi, he was like the head of the COVID resource workshops and supporting clients. So, he was actually doing like how can clients manage their portfolio companies to manage COVID. So, they had done a lot of research so there was all around like these knowledge share platforms, so everyone was still able to share information, still keep connected. (Respondent 10, 2020)

The ability for managers to connect their teams and themselves to broader networks aided these leaders in decision making, in mental framework building and in sense making surrounding what was happening on the ground around the world. This additional insight combined with the willingness to admit that they weren't clear on a route forward enabled them to be open, to learn and to grow.

And again, that took me to bounce ideas off certain people. So, say 'Look, what do I do here? What is your suggestion?' And specifically, that we work together well. And then guys from leadership roles, I asked again 'What are your thoughts?' (Respondent 6, 2020)

Also, again, working with many other teams, outside of our region, so outside of SA we would go to the UAE, to EMEA, to all of these guys to find more information. So, it is like the hive mind expanded during all of this. (Respondent 7, 2020)

And good ideas came from that, good advice came from that, people had different experiences, different backgrounds. So that helped. So, I think in that sense we were very proactive in supporting one another in our approach. (Respondent 2, 2020)

5.6.5 Individual Behaviour: Perspective and Positivity

This dynamic and stressful period for the participants also provided an opportunity for both reflection and perspective for these managers. Gratitude and perspective were strong themes that were raised when discussing how these managers remained focused on what needed to be done while simultaneously balancing their own individual and personal stressors.

I mean it has been a ... personally it has been a massive time for introspection for me. And I was an incredibly career-driven person, and I have become softer through this. I have realised that family and going through a patch where you are not able to see your family, where it was actually illegal to go and see your family, really affected me! (Respondent 3, 2020)

And I realised reflecting, that it has been like a good three or so years where I have just had the blinkers on and have completely disregarded those things, that make me a better person in the office: I have lost out on family, I haven't done the things that fill my soul as much as I would have liked to, and I now am realising that there needs to be a balance. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Some of the participants referenced focussing on more than just results for their businesses. Participants made reference to adding value, to being productive and having a purpose.

It is a long, long road we are about to go on, and if it is consistently going to feel like a grind then it is going to be a very, very difficult next 5/10/15 years, but find your raison d'etre, your real purpose, and drive towards that. (Respondent 2, 2020)

So it has made me more alert, made me appreciate a lot more of what I have got, and I think that has filtered through in my behaviour and my interactions with people professionally and personally, and ja, being more deliberate. (Respondent 9, 2020)

Ultimately, an acknowledgement was made where the participants realised that this period in their lives had changed them and they were grateful for the experience and the lessons they had learnt as individuals and as leaders.

This is no longer just a job anymore, this is... I have been through this hell of a journey this year and this business has remained sustainable and I almost feel... I am thankful I still have a job man, Jesus, anything could have happened! And I think from that perspective it has changed me, my mindset, the decisions I make. (Respondent 9, 2020)

The ability to continue to focus on the positive outcomes or aspects was a source of strength and provided the much-needed perspective that many of these leaders required to maintain the focus and energy within themselves.

My big focus was from my side to keep the positivity up, and however I could do that, I tried to make that happen because I know just from... I think the biggest thing is that you have always got to see yourself aligning because if you drop your head that's literally things just falling apart. So, my biggest goal was to keep the positivity. (Respondent 6, 2020)

And be energetic and think positive about that you know? We can talk about all the other shit in this world, but I refuse to talk about that; we kind of lock on to that thing and it seems like it keeps us going. (Respondent 9, 2020)

And then I think ultimately being positive around it right, to say 'Look guys, we need to... clearly it is very serious, clearly it is taking people's lives, clearly it is impacting us quite negatively and we know the impacts on the economy, but we need to be positive about it right?' (Respondent 3, 2020)

The participants then used this positivity within themselves to encourage energy and optimism into their teams, leading by example and willing their teams to bring a positive mindset to everything they did. This, combined with the leadership responses discussed earlier in this chapter helped maintain the energy, communication and transparency within their teams and in essence formed a feedback loop in which a positive narrative from the leader led to team positivity which created more leader positivity.

I adapted my leadership style, which is always kind of keep the positivity and I just adapted it to a lockdown situation which as best as possible, I could – whether it was a Zoom quiz, whether it was organising teams of 30 Seconds, and somehow making 30 Seconds work online with 20 people, all dialling in, shouting across and having drinks on a Friday – just to make that happen, and keeping the spirits up in a time where you had all this stress and negativity and people reporting on deaths happening. (Respondent 6, 2020)

5.6.6 Question 4: Results Summary

Question 4 provides insight into the various focal area's participants felt required attention when attempting to manage themselves within an extreme context. Most notably, it seems the participants neglected their own management during this challenging time, many of whom pushed themselves to the brink of burn out while attempting to lead their teams and firms through this challenging period. Additionally, it seems a growth mindset and the need to continue to search for the positive in a situation was required when facing these challenging and uncertain times.

5.7 Summary of Findings

There is little doubt, based on the feedback received from the participants, that their experiences within the extreme context caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the paradigm shifts required within their businesses and how they lead their teams has had a dramatic impact on them. The uncertainty, volatility and increasing complexity within the system has required them to shift their responses as leaders and as individuals, requiring them to adapt to an ever changing and highly dynamic set of variables.

This chapter focused on outlining the results of the interviews conducted with the sampled middle managers surrounding their leadership response within an extreme context. The chapter aligned the results to the identified research questions and framed the participants' views based on their own individual experiences. Chapter 6 will focus on the discussion and analysis of these results in detail.

6 CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the data presented in Chapter 5, aligned to the research questions presented in Chapter 3 and in conjunction with the literature review conducted in Chapter 2. This chapter follows the same structure as presented in Chapter 5 and provides the corresponding literature required to analyse the findings. The chapter presents conclusions based on the presented data, supported by the literature, providing insight into the middle management leadership response required when facing an extreme context.

6.2 Background

Birkenshaw et al. (2016) postulated that most firms fail to adapt to the changes in their environment, negatively impacting these firms and their performance within a market. Ultimately it is the responsibility of a firm's leadership to drive adaptation within the firm (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) and simultaneously to ensure that the required changes necessary to benefit from the adaptation are successfully implemented. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), further leadership paradigm shifts are required in order to assist leaders with the management of the already increasingly complex and rapidly changing environments in which they operate. The required shifts from firms in both the strategic and operational spheres add further complexity to an already rapidly changing environment, forcing leaders to not only shift their thinking but also to shift their response (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019).

Additionally, Osborn et al. (2002) postulated that effective leadership is inherently tied to context and that a change in context should create a change in leadership. Within the framework of this research project, the COVID-19 pandemic was defined as an extreme context. It arrived without warning and fundamentally shifted the operating environment across the world, generating widespread panic which has resulted in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological and material consequences for firms (FitzGerald et al., 2020).

6.3 Research Question 1: Discussion of Results

What leadership response was required to successfully deal with the leadership challenges presented within an extreme context?

Question 1 of this research project attempted to explore what leadership responses were required from the participants when faced with leading a team throughout an extreme context. This question and the relevant information from the research report are explored below based on the themes that arose within the analysis of the results.

6.3.1 Leadership Response: Sense Making and Sense Giving

Complex and stressful situations within organisations often lead to sense making across the firm as team members attempt to understand and define their new operating environment (Kraft, Sparr & Peus, 2016). Weick and Roberts (1993) suggest that sense making requires members of the firm to develop their own frameworks for understanding change, interpreting information from an environment in an effort to organise the information they receive. Sense giving however, is the deliberate attempt by an individual to direct other individual's sense making surrounding an event or context, essentially impacting the perception of others (Kraft et al., 2016). These behaviours were referenced by a number of participants who were attempting to both understand the environment in which they were operating while simultaneously attempting to control the information flow and ultimately the narrative regarding the situation within their teams.

I think for me the initial thing was dealing with people's fears of the unknown and misinformation and not understanding the issue fully. And when I say that, I didn't even understand it fully. (Respondent 9, 2020)

Within this research and while facing this extreme context, it becomes evident that participants focused on their own ability to both 'sense make' and 'sense give' for their teams. The need to continually assess the surrounding environment, engage with a broader network, assess incoming information from both internal and external sources of the firm and ask for additional support when required was a leadership response that was relevant within the participant research group. Burke et al. (2017) have highlighted how leaders influence their team's cognitive views through their own sense making and sense giving. This takes the form of problem identification, planning, team development and team motivation. When faced with this changing environment, we can find evidence of sense making as well as sense giving as seen below:

I think the first point of call is obviously to try and bring calmness to the organisation and try and reassure people that things will be okay to the best of our knowledge. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Leaders were required to contextualise a large amount of information and provide feedback to their team in a meaningful and manageable way that provided assurance to the team that the leader could make sense and provide sense, where possible, within the rapidly changing environment.

You have to filter that information to different contexts you know – how they receive it and how they distribute it. (Respondent 7, 2020)

I think the team feels best if they have a very good framework that they can operate in. They feel very secure and you have brilliant performance. (Respondent 8, 2020)

Leaders were also required to filter the information their teams received, further illustrating their role as sense givers:

I am not withholding information, but all I am saying is focus and not to blame the management or pass on the risk, but to kind of buffer it a bit and give the fullest opportunity for that guy to flourish. (Respondent 8, 2020)

The continually changing environment within which the research participants were operating required the leaders to focus on both sense making and sense giving in order to “buffer all the worries in life and make sure that he just focuses” (Respondent 8, 2020).

6.3.2 Leadership Response: Increased Transparent Communication

Every interaction within a complex system allows for an information exchange between agents that promotes learning, sharing and adaptation (Anderson, 1999). Furthermore, Anderson (1999) stated that it is within these interactions that a dynamic system moves forward as the agents learn and adapt their approaches within the system and adjust their responses as required (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009). Communication was a key focal area that emerged within the research project, providing teams and their leaders the ability to continually engage, regardless of the changing environment around them, evidenced by the participants responses below:

It was difficult, because there was a lot of uncertainty and a lot of adaption that needed to take place, and we didn't know how it was going to play out. So, in a sense the first point or the first step was almost a level of calmness, and communication – and I think the only way you can do that is to communicate effectively. (Respondent 5, 2020)

I think you have to keep that line of communication so that people know what is going on. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Nichols, Hayden & Trendler (2020) postulate that when facing challenging circumstances, leaders are required continue to focus on the realignment of their team towards the identified priorities. This consistent engagement provides motivation through clearly communicated team goals and information (Nichols, Hayden & Trendler, 2020). Given the level of uncertainty within the system and aligned to the leaders attempts to both 'sense make' and 'sense give', initiated by the extreme context, leaders attempted to utilise their communication channels to reduce panic and present a strong, clear message to their teams:

I think calmness was definitely the first thing and trying to open up lines of communication – which is what we did very effectively. (Respondent 5, 2020)

So, it is forging through and trying to find the right thing to do, whilst at the same time it is very, very important, especially in these circumstances, to not let your team freak out, because if you don't kind of keep calm and assist them with whatever it is ... like you need to make sure that they understand that this is serious that we are going through this, it's like the WHO wouldn't just say shut down the world right now for no reason whatsoever. So, it is serious. (Respondent 7, 2020)

This feedback aligns with the statements of Zaccaro, Heinen and Shuffler (2009) who postulate that leadership response impacts team member motivation, group cohesion and team efficiency. Effective, streamlined and continuous communication served as a focal point for the participants, allowing and promoting the rapid exchange of information and the control of group cohesion and motivation. Additionally, this continuous communication provided leaders with the opportunity to control the message across their teams, ensuring a high level of clarity within the message.

But those lines of communication have got to be streamlined and have got to be put forward in a proper manner, in a proper language. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Simultaneously, this continuous communication created a dialogue between the leader and the followers, promoting a proactive engagement with the broader network within the firm. This increased network, labelled by one particular participant as a “hive mind” (Respondent 7, 2020), provided leaders with a broader focus and experience set from which to draw information and make the correct decisions within an environment devoid of certainty (Baran and Scott, 2010).

Additionally, leaders made reference to a focus on transparent, open and honest communication. Facing challenges across the business that included health and wellness related threats for their teams as well financial impact threats that included job loses, redundancies, pay cuts and business foreclosures, leaders felt it necessary to operate as transparently as possible in order to successfully manage their teams and their team’s expectations.

I think the main thing was then also to remind the teams that we are all going through something really crazy right now. No one alive has gone through this and our no. I priority is you, your no. I priority is you. And my no. I priority is me as well. So, you need to take care of yourself. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Through transparent communication and the opening up of a dialogue between the team and the leader, the participants opened themselves up to answering tough questions from their teams in an attempt to ‘sense make’ and ‘sense give’ and ultimately attempted to control the narrative surrounding the extreme context the business faced through open communication.

That’s the communication we took, and ja, I think it worked quite well you know, being able to ask the CEO questions and some of them were tough questions, like ‘Are we going to have retrenchments?’ and the CFO saying, ‘The possibility is very, very high but we are looking at all mechanisms and stuff that we can do before we go down to cutting staff.’ (Respondent 9, 2020)

Zaccaro, Heinen and Shuffler (2009) postulate that when facing extreme contexts, effective leadership may be the critical element necessary to assist teams in the reduction of stressors relating to the task at hand. The creation of a positive social climate, aided by open and honest communication, encourages effective teamwork, especially when facing challenging circumstances (Baran and Scott, 2010). This literature supports the actions of the participants attempting to continuously check in with

their teams and supports the open and honest dialogue created in an attempt to make sense of the fears within the individuals in the team.

6.3.3 Leadership Response: Ongoing Team 'Collaboration'

Arena (2018) has postulated that leaders are required to enable adaptive space by facilitating the movement of ideas across the firm, essentially creating and holding space for emergence. Leaders do this through two specific behaviours: brokerage of ideas and group cohesion.

- Brokerage: Leadership brokerage attempts to connect or 'bridge' one group of agents to another. This 'bridge' enables agents to develop new ideas, assimilate new information and amplify their actions in order to gain scale (Arena, 2018). This behaviour provides agents the information required to spark new ideas and influences the distribution of information.
- Group cohesion: Group cohesion allows agents within a system the space to iterate and pressure test their ideas. This behaviour provides agents the opportunity to share information under conditions of high levels of trust.

Leadership brokerage and group cohesion emerged as focal points throughout the research report and were referenced as individual, team and leadership responses required when facing an extreme context. Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) made reference to the interaction of agents within a system and the influencing power of these interactions, essentially serving as the driving force behind the development of a mutual understanding between agents. This interaction served as a behaviour that allowed agents within the system to learn and adapt based on the exchange of information between the agents. Within this research project, the participants referenced this continuous learning, ongoing interaction, engagement and sharing of information as collaboration, led by the middle manager.

Some of the leaders took a more autocratic approach to 'collaboration', essentially setting the course for their team while making sure the team understood the direction:

There is upfront collaboration, you have got to set the directions, set the narrative up front, give people the north star to follow and then guide them along that path. (Respondent 2, 2020)

While other participants undertook a more consultative approach:

Because the consensus and acknowledging people's voices and making sure that those voices are heard, is key on the journey. So, they feel they have bought in. (Respondent 3, 2020)

And then from there to go and say 'This is what we are thinking we would like to do to get to that point. What do you guys think? How would you approach it?'. (Respondent 7, 2020)

Moreover, evident within the research was that leaders needed to collaborate with their team members, often listening to feedback, suggestions and ideas on team direction and next steps within the constantly changing and complex environment in which they were operating. Mendes et al. (2016), with a specific reference to complexity leadership, stated that leadership within a complex system remains a shared and emergent process in which interaction promotes learning and adaptation. Additionally, and with a specific focus on the entrepreneurial leadership style presented by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) within their complexity leadership framework, the engagement of a group in an attempt to implement new ideas based on the limited resources available aligns to the data collected from the participants.

As stated, 'collaboration' in the form of both brokerage behaviour and group cohesion in an attempt to share ideas and information was a key leadership response from middle managers within the research report with one participant making it clear that 'collaboration' was a key leadership response for any leader in the future:

Collaboration I think is one thing I have come to realise is probably the most valuable traits that a great leader can have. (Respondent 4, 2020)

Existing literature surrounding Complexity Leadership Theory supports these findings, reiterating that leadership collaboration (brokerage and group cohesion) within a team is required when facing the complex environment created within an extreme context (Arena, 2018).

6.3.4 Leadership Response: Managing Uncertainty through Autonomy

According to Mumford et al. (2007), disruptive events within a firm create a highly uncertain, complex and emotional environment in which the firm is required to make sense of the new paradigm in which they operate and adapt accordingly. Strategic management, according to Bogers et al. (2019), is leadership's attempt to assist the firm in achieving the required adaptation. Additionally, leaders are required to promote firm

adaptation while simultaneously balancing the business requirements for continued operation. This necessitates a leadership approach that can effectively address the requisite complexity within the environment while concurrently adapting to the context in which the firm finds itself in order to maintain the firm's competitive advantage (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Within the research project, numerous participants made reference to being uncertain of their decisions or actions. This self-doubt was rooted within the changing environment in which they were operating, combined with their limited experience of anything similar in nature to the COVID-19 pandemic:

I mean it has changed constantly, and that has been the biggest thing from a leadership perspective in [business reference], was understanding how to lead while the ground beneath you is changing constantly. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Arena (2018) postulated that an adaptive response requires leaders to pursue a new approach or alternative way of thinking, moving away from a top-down leadership approach and towards leadership focussed on the creation of an environment enabling emergence. A firm's adaptive response to a complex challenge is one in which actors within the firm are empowered to "resonate around a new approach, alternative way of thinking, or adaptive solution" when facing complex challenges (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, p. 11). The empowerment of the team to make decisions and act autonomously, albeit in line with an overarching strategic framework, was a key focal area while exploring the required leadership response to an extreme context. Within the research participants, this was evident as leaders began to empower their teams to act autonomously, releasing control where appropriate in order to provide their teams with "freedom to discover their jobs for themselves" (Respondent 6, 2020).

What I tried to do was try to give people some level of autonomy, because when you are in states of change most leaders unconsciously micromanage and want to control, but in actual fact that further perpetuates the threat state you are driving then, because when you micromanage and control, people feel like you don't trust them to deliver on or execute the task that they are required to do. So, within the autonomy we just need to figure out what are the expectations of what good and bad is, or good and not so good, and how can we support one another to be as good as possible shall I say? (Respondent 3, 2020)

Additionally, the participants made specific reference to letting go, releasing control, empowering their teams or providing the freedom that their teams required to behave and react as required based on the changing environment.

I have learnt to let go a little bit more in the sense I know I can do it, but I want you to do it and if you need help, I will help you and I will show you how and what the steps are so you can learn from me. (Respondent 7, 2020)

I like to give my teams the freedom to discover their jobs for themselves as well, because even though we have targets we need to meet, it doesn't mean the way that I do it will work for everyone. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Through their promotion of continuous collaboration and ongoing communication within their teams, a number of the research participants made further reference to the creation and maintenance of 'space' for their teams to act accordingly. As highlighted by Arena (2018), adaptive space is a condition that enables networked interactions through the removal of bureaucracy, the opening up of formal and informal information flow channels, and the acceptance that adaptability lies within the interconnectivity of a networked system and the agents operating within that system. This behaviour from the participants aligns to the enabling leadership behaviour highlighted by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016). Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) further explain that through the creation and support of firm structures and systems that look to support and intensify emergence, enabling leadership will deliver the required firm adaptation necessary to sustain ongoing competitive advantage.

As demonstrated, existing literature surrounding Complexity Leadership Theory supports these findings, reiterating that when facing the complex environment created within an extreme context, a leader is required to pursue a new approach or alternative way of thinking, moving away from a top-down leadership approach and towards leadership focussed on the creation of an environment enabling emergence. Additionally, as stated by Arena (2018), an adaptive approach in which leaders create space for their teams as opposed to an ordered response in which leaders implement additional controls elicits a more positive adaptive response from teams.

6.3.5 Leadership Approach: People vs Task Focused Approach

Numerous participants made reference to the required adaptation of their approach to the way in which they led their teams. Reference was made to shifting away from a more task focused attitude, favoured by many managers:

And it wasn't an adversarial type conversation, it was if this is that uncomfortable for you, if the position that we are in at the moment is that uncomfortable for you, you need to go somewhere else because you are not going to get fulfilment doing this. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Towards a more empathetic or people focused attitude:

So, the change coming at my people was like at a rapid pace! So ja, it was [leadership approach] empathetic, patient and compassionate and a bit feminine, that softer side. (Respondent 2, 2020)

An empathetic or people-centric leadership approach that was cognisant of the pressure, stress and overall negative impact that the extreme context had on individual team members was an evident cognitive response that emerged as incredibly relevant to the participants.

So, if people show up badly I kind of come down quite hard and then I have to catch myself and say 'Well we are in unprecedented times of change where people are trying to really just do their best, give them a little bit more leeway and acknowledge where they find themselves and then support them on that. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Leaders within the sample group referenced this shift in order to take into account the difficulties their teams were facing based on the environment they were operating and the negative impact this stress was having on their team's ability to operate successfully. This required change aligns to the findings of Sorokin (1943) who demonstrated that when facing an extreme context, members of a group could become so overly stimulated and emotional that their ability to process information and make the correct decisions were negatively impacted. This finding by Sorokin (1943) was reinforced by a respondent who made specific reference to an error within his work, made because of the stress he was under, causing further pressure and additional work for the team: "*I messed it up, and the whole team had to work like 24 hours just to fix my mistake*" (Respondent 2, 2020). Leaders, understanding this pressure within the system, adjusted their approach to help their teams manage the situation by focusing more on the individuals than the task.

Additionally, participants referenced taking the time to check in personally with their team members individually, assessing their team's reactions to issues or concerns and assessing their produced work and comparing it to normal outputs from prior to the extreme context. Through this, leaders assessed whether a team member remained alert, connected and engaged.

I think it would be a good dose of empathy, to put yourself in people's shoes and understand how are they experiencing this entire situation at the moment, what are things like. (Respondent 3, 2020)

As more certainty returned to the system however, leaders within the sample seemed to oscillate back to their previous leadership approach, suggesting that the shift in approach was driven by the contextual environment within the system but as those pressures began to dissipate, the leaders felt the need to re-engage their team aligned to their previous approach. This aligns to the statements by Kozlowski, Watola, Jensen, Kim & Botero (2009) suggesting that the role of a leader within a team undergoes development as the team develops and the role of the leader changes.

You know we have a target to hit and if you decide you want to sit at home and not hit your activity metrics or targets then you are not going to get your salary back, and actually from a sales point of view we are the ones carrying this business. (Respondent 1, 2020)

'Okay, the time for games is over, lockdown is finished, let's look forward, we have done all the hard stuff, let's look forward now and it is in your hands to get our shit together to make sure that the company survives.' (Respondent 3, 2020)

Don't you dare feel sorry for yourself because you are not alone; there are people who have it far, far worse, there are people that have it better, but you are not alone. (Respondent 2, 2020)

This oscillation between task- or people-focused approaches however does seem to be an approach that has worked for the participants as the various leaders reference the need to travel along the spectrum based on their tasks, teams and requirements.

So again, there was a rally cry that needed to happen and there was also a mix... and like a mix of a tough but sincere and gentle approach. (Respondent 2, 2020)

6.3.6 Question 1: Analysis Summary

Within the sampled participants, it becomes clear that the ability for leaders to make sense of the changes within their environment and process those changes in order to communicate them to their team members in a clear and concise manner was key. Additionally, leaders were required to communicate as often and as transparently as possible, helping their team members both make sense of the environment and challenges they faced while simultaneously helping those team members understand what those changes to the environment meant for the firm and the team practically. Furthermore, leaders were required to provide additional autonomy to their teams, allowing their teams the freedom to act and react accordingly to the changing environment while maintaining a focus on a central direction strategically. These behaviours align to those presented within the Complexity Leadership Framework within Enabling Leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016).

Enabling leadership is focussed on the creation, maintenance and sustainability of the adaptive space produced at the intersection and overlap of the entrepreneurial and operational leadership styles (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). This form of leadership, introduced by complexity thinking, enables firms to be adaptive and agile in the face of complexity (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) further explained that through the creation and support of firm structures and systems that look to support and intensify emergence, enabling leadership will deliver the required firm adaptation required to sustain the necessary competitive advantage.

In order to successfully navigate these changes and the challenges posed by the extreme context, leaders were required to soften their leadership approach, assuming a more people-centric focus over a task focused one and focussing on the individual needs of each team member in an authentic and open way, making a cognitive decision to attempt to connect deeper with their staff and understand at a human level the challenges they faced in their personal and professional lives. While the data gathered from the participants within this research project echo the above sentiments expressed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) regarding enabling leadership, the additional response factors surrounding the approach based on the context in which the participants were leading remain incredibly important. Osborn et al. (2002) postulated that effective leadership is inherently tied to context and that a change in context should create a change in leadership. The continuously changing operating environment in which the participants were engaged generated widespread panic and resulted in extensive

physical, psychological and material consequences for firms and the teams operating in these firms (FitzGerald et al., 2020).

This change in context has required a change in the approach to enabling leadership, adding an additional human-centric response as leaders were required to deal with the added complexity of stress, burn-out, fear, anxiety and uncertainty because of the extreme context. That said however, the data does then demonstrate a reversion of that focus away from the people-centric approach towards a more task focused one as the uncertainty and unknowns within the system dissipate, demonstrating that perhaps an oscillation within a leadership approach is required when facing changes in context. This oscillation between a task- or people-focussed approach is an additional consideration not accounted for within the Complexity Leadership Theory Framework that requires inclusion to best serve leaders facing uncertain, changing or extreme contexts.

6.4 Research Question 2: Discussion of Results

How might the required leadership response shift across the periods that precede, during and following the extreme contexts when managing the various strategic and operational changes required by the firm?

Question 2 of this research project attempted to explore whether a cognitive shift in leadership response was required while leading throughout an extreme context and if required, how those shifts differed throughout the identified periods. This research question is discussed below based on the themes that arose within the analysis of the results.

Schoemaker et al. (2018) postulated that both flexibility and adaptability from leaders will be required in order to successfully navigate the ever changing and challenging circumstances faced within their environments. Additionally, Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) made reference to a leader's ability to manage their firms for efficiency and results while simultaneously incorporating the new knowledge they learn as a vital skill when managing within complex environments.

As highlighted, the environment in which the research participants were operating was one in which team members and the firm faced extensive physical, psychological and material consequences (FitzGerald et al., 2020). While facing these challenges, firms

were required to shift their strategic and operational activities in order to react to the immediate shift in their operating environment.

Things were changing at some stage like daily, you know we would have daily financial and revenue discussions about where we were at with sales, to see if we were tracking against the adjusted targets and budgets. So, the change was every day, and sometimes ja, it definitely changed, and definitely conscious! (Respondent 9, 2020)

With the above in mind, the feedback from the participants has been grouped collectively to focus on the strategic and operational shifts as one section and the leadership behaviours aligned to these shifts as a separate section in order to provide an analysis framework to understand and group the feedback received.

6.4.1 Strategic and Operational Shifts

With so much uncertainty in the system and with the environment constantly shifting, the ability for leaders to focus on the strategic positioning of their firms became incredibly challenging. With that in mind, leaders began to break up their strategic focus to take both short-term and long-term views, essentially attempting to balance both views simultaneously, based on the information sourced, and behave accordingly.

6.4.1.1 Short-term Strategy Focus

Participants began to focus specifically on small wins based on the control they had over the variables that existed within reach.

It is really short-term goals, driving short-term goals the whole time. So, my goal has completely changed. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Focus on the now, focus on your deals, focus on what you can control – and don't focus too much on the uncontrollable because that will just side-track you completely. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Participants were action orientated, focusing on securing their existing revenue with clients and pivoting their firm's strategic focus where necessary to ensure their firms continued to be able to service both existing clients and even new clients where possible.

The same thing with, you know, delivering on clients, deliverables, getting stuff done for them – I think a big thing for me was saying ultimately that is still what I am working towards, that is what I need to achieve, I can't disappoint and let them down, there is a contract that has been agreed to between us and them, so how do I keep the ball rolling? So, keeping that firmly in mind, but being flexible enough and changing what needs to change – and sticking to routines that work where they do work. (Respondent 11, 2020)

Through constant dialogue across their team and the leverage of their broader networks where appropriate, the research participants utilised their resources as best as possible in order to adapt as required. Additionally, the leaders iterated, adjusting their approach and their short-term focus while remaining open to future shifts.

I mean this week we have had three strategy sessions for next year. We have done like a short-term – a six months, how we generate as much revenue from now until March – and then for the next 18 months. (Respondent 3, 2020)

This action-orientated approach aligns to the behaviour identified by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) within their complexity leadership framework as Entrepreneurial Leadership, highlighting new ideas, new skills and new processes that drive firm competitiveness and success based on the limited resources available.

So instead of letting the people wonder about 500 million things, let's just focus on that small step in front of us you know, and then let's get through that. So, I think that's... I mean the words are evolving as I am speaking but I think that is really where the focus is, it is really about the short-term gains I can almost say, and getting that energy back into that system. (Respondent 8, 2020)

Often both patient and persistent, entrepreneurial leaders demonstrate the flexibility and tenacity required to continue to push the system towards adaptation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016). We further see this attitude referenced by participants, expressed as individual resilience, positivity and a willingness to continue to drive their firms forward with a focus on short term goals.

6.4.1.2 Long-term Strategy Focus

While the short-term focus within the firm remained the responsibility of the middle management participants, the more long-term strategic focus was the responsibility of the firm's executive leadership.

I think businesses have got to be broken up in a way that allows effective lines of communication from all departments to filter back up, because ultimately there are only a select few from a strategic perspective, from a cultural perspective, a few individuals who have really got a say in where they are heading, in where the organisation is heading and what the ultimate goal and strategy is going forward – they have got the bigger picture. (Respondent 5, 2020)

This aligns to extant literature that assigns the responsibility of the firm's strategy development to the executive actors within the firm in a 'top-down' approach, and the operational activities necessary to action the required strategy in a 'bottom-up' approach (Randhawa et al., 2019). Wilden, Devinney and Dowling, (2016) stated, however, that middle management holds a position at the intersection of both the strategic and operational environment and, as such, play a vital role in the balancing of both the strategic and operational focus of their firm.

When taking a longer-term strategic view into account, it became clear that the middle management respondents adjusted both their mindsets and behaviour towards a more Operational Leadership approach. The participants began to focus on the development and implementation of processes and systems that would specifically aid the business in the long term, based on the environmental shifts occurring within the market in the short term. The participants proactively sought to address issues that were either well known but never a priority, or that had become obvious based on the challenges that were being faced by the firm at the time.

...relook at all processes, relook at all people, relook at all departments, relook at systems – everything, and just make ourselves leaner, meaner, and better processes. (Respondent 1, 2020)

The alignment of the systems and processes required to execute against an idea and convert that idea into practice is a key operational leadership behaviour highlighted by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) within their complexity leadership framework. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), operational leaders are focused on converting ideas into systems and structures. This is highlighted within the data by the participants who make specific reference to addressing "inefficiencies within the business" (Respondent 1), "streamlining that whole implementation so it almost becomes automated" (Respondent 3) and "relook at all processes, relook at all people, relook at all departments, relook at systems – everything, and just make ourselves leaner, meaner, and better processes" (Respondent 6).

While focus from the middle management leaders was concentrated on the tactical, short term and perhaps more operationally focused responses required, participants remained cognisant of the dual strategic focus that was needed across the organisation as balance between the short term and long-term view of the firm and in parallel, the entrepreneurial and operational leadership style was needed.

You know, you have to be tactical because you need to have that pot cooking still at the same time, or the bees need to still make the honey, but then on the other side you also need to decide where are we going to put the beehive here. (Respondent 8, 2020)

6.4.2 Leadership Shift

Based on the feedback received from the participants, a shift was required in their leadership approach in the way they engaged with their teams. Feedback suggests that leaders who favoured a more task-focused, or outcome-based approach adopted a more people-centric approach within the 'during' phase of the defined research periods. Additionally, as evidenced above, we see a shift in the focus of the leaders from a mixture between strategic and operational behaviour towards a dominant operational outlook based on the short-term focus of their firms.

In terms of the task-focused and people-centric approach, we see evidence of leaders attempting to connect more with their team members in an authentic and relationship-based approach with numerous leaders engaging first and foremost with their team members about their family, mental and physical health and wellness, and additional subjects outside of the professional focus.

From a management perspective I think it has been quite nice in a sense to experience something like this because it brings people closer together, especially almost breaking an organisation up into smaller siloes, you get to understand people's needs a little bit better, you get to know people a little bit better and you open up lines of communication – which I think was a little lacking. (Respondent 5, 2020)

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) highlighted the need of leaders creating adaptive space to utilise 'development' as a focal area of creating adaptive space. 'Development' requires leaders to create a strong and interlinked network throughout the firm, built on trust (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016; 2019). Based on the evidence gathered within the participant group, a key focus on the human above the task at hand from the leader when facing an extreme

context was vital in the building and maintenance of this trust component, essentially requiring the leader to take a more empathetic and authentic approach to the management of their team members.

'What are you dealing with at home? Have you got three children at home? Do they need to be fed every three hours or do you have an elderly sick mother at home that you are taking care of, that possibly is affecting your workflow negatively, and challenges logistically?' So, I think from a management perspective it is almost down to understanding people a little bit better, understanding the challenges that they face – which is good. (Respondent 4, 2020)

Additionally, some leaders within the participant group that made reference to moving away from a task-focus towards a people-focus within the 'during' phase of the research period made reference to returning to a task-focus as some certainty began to return to the system.

I think personally is that once again, with change, there becomes a lot of ambiguity and a lot of fluffiness in the system, and once again we need to come together and re-align, re-purpose and really focus on what is the common ground that we all have in relation to achieving our goals for the next 18 months. And hopefully everyone buys into it and they are clear around what that looks like, so we can kind of move forward. (Respondent 3, 2020)

This shift demonstrates a change in leadership approach within the changing context, demonstrating a sensitivity from the leaders to the context within which they were operating and within which their teams were operating, and shifting their response accordingly.

6.4.3 Question 2: Analysis Summary

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) focused specifically on three key leadership styles that enable and protect the required adaptive space necessary for adaptive change: entrepreneurial, operational and enabling leadership. The complexity leadership framework developed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) specifically focuses on the intertwined usage of various leadership styles within complex adaptive systems in order to enable firms to be as effective as possible while addressing their relevant environmental complexity.

When reviewing the data presented in Chapter 5 in conjunction with the existing literature surrounding complexity leadership presented in Chapter 2, a link can be drawn based on the continuous shift between the three highlighted behaviours from the participants based on their short- or long-term focus. The participants within the research project shifted their leadership styles in accordance with their focus and while balancing the strategic and operational requirements from their businesses.

Additionally, as highlighted by the shift within their approach to leadership (task-centric vs people-centric) and the shift in their leadership styles (entrepreneurial, operational and enabling), it becomes clear that a dynamic view of leadership from an approach and style perspective is required when facing a dynamic, complex and extreme context. This reinforces the various statements made by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016; 2018) demonstrating that complex environments require complex leadership approaches, essentially requiring leaders to meet complexity with complexity.

This dynamic approach to leadership however should not be confused with an inconsistent approach to leadership. This point, reinforced by the participants within the sample, demonstrates that leaders are required to be consistent in their mission, their vision and their values but dynamic in their style, their approach and their thinking, especially when facing a complex and ever-changing environment in which teams face uncertainty.

6.5 Research Question 3: Discussion of Results

How did leaders ensure their teams continued to operate successfully while facing an extreme context?

Question 3 of this research project attempted to explore what actions leaders utilised to facilitate team interaction to ensure team success while leading within an extreme context. This research question is discussed below based on the focal areas that arose within the review of the results.

6.5.1 Team Behaviour: Collaboration, Communication and Problem Solving

Entrepreneurial leadership, according to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), attempts to solve problems through the development of new ideas, new products, new skills and new processes. Furthermore, entrepreneurial leaders, through the development of and engagement with cohesive groups, attempt to develop and implement these new ideas

based on the limited resources they have available (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). While facing this new environment and the challenges presented by the extreme context, the research participants made use of their teams to jointly problem solve in a collaborative manner. This, for many of the participants, meant including team members to discuss challenges that ultimately were outside of their area of focus.

That is how I found we worked quite well. We kind of all stepped out of our lanes and have all helped out where we are maybe not entirely comfortable, but realise that it goes around as well. (Respondent 2, 2020)

And that is why I think as a team there has got to be a level of cohesion between your team, where guys are able to flex and to pick up the work load and allow people to take a bit of a back seat when they are burning out. (Respondent 3, 2020)

While the above behaviour aligns to entrepreneurial leadership in its attempt to create new ideas and drive action, it simultaneously aligns to operational leadership and the behaviour of aligning. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), aligning involves operational leaders searching for the correct resources required to bring an idea to life. This leadership behaviour was utilised by the participants in an attempt to support the priority ideas where possible, evidenced by leadership requesting team members step “out of our lanes and have all helped out where we are maybe not entirely comfortable” (Respondent 2, 2020). Dealing with these ideas required leaders to tap into their networks and search for new ways to achieve the same results while simultaneously searching for new routes to pivot towards in order to drive adaptation. Nichols, Hayden & Trendler (2020) have stated that leaders operating within challenging environments are required to seek input from a variety of different sources, admitting when they don’t have the answers and bringing in external expertise when required.

Furthermore, some firms even successfully managed to allocate resources to projects that required additional attention collaboratively, instituting systems that allowed colleagues in other teams to provide additional support should they have some capacity. Again, this behaviour aligns to that of an operational leader as defined by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016). These were new ideas implemented off the back of the changing environment that required the entire team to change their way of operating and collaboratively solve problems together.

Another thing that we implemented during lockdown was around forecasting three weeks in advance your workload in terms of billable hours, and I think that was quite a nice way of also sharing workload and making sure that the team is always as busy as they possibly can be, so that no one is left behind. So because on that weekly call we all forecast our hours, and then when someone goes like 'I have the capacity to support' you therefore know then that person will perhaps support during the week and the onus is on you as a manager to also... well it is both, top down and bottom up, to reach out respectively to get work. (Respondent 10, 2020)

Additionally, a major focus for driving successful team interaction was continuous team communication, driven by the need to internally collaborate. This required various new communication channels based on the operating environment in which teams were engaging.

Again, within a structure or framework, as long as the communication is happening within that time, it just creates a clear path for everyone, and everyone is working together. (Respondent 8, 2020)

Entrepreneurial leaders, through the development of and engagement with cohesive groups, are required to develop and implement these new ideas based on the limited resources they have available (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). In order to do that, these leaders are required to socialise their ideas up and down the firm across their networks in order to gain more information and more traction around the adaptation. This is evident across the research participants with a number of participants referencing constant 'check-in's' with their teams as well as strategy sessions focused on gathering data, presenting ideas, getting buy-in and initiating.

So, it has brought about a better line of communication, a more regular line of communication which we didn't have previously. And I find that is quite effective. (Respondent 10, 2020)

Sponsoring, a behavioural trait aligned to operational leadership, is the consolidation of ideas from within the adaptive space and the placing of those ideas within systems and processes (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) of the firm. This behaviour was evident throughout the research interviews as respondents made reference to a collaborative leadership approach when facing challenges not experienced previously. Listening to the views of their team members and reacting accordingly, and reaching an outcome based on the team discussion, became key to leaders retaining the attention and engagement from their teams.

And it forced us to engage with each other a lot more, whether it was more beneficial than being face to face I can't say for certain, I still believe a face to face interaction or meeting amongst the team was better had, but it forced us to do it and almost on a regular basis, every morning at 8 o'clock we would sit with our particular teams and discuss what was going to happen for the day, discuss what needed to be done, and then if you had to jump on a call in the afternoon you would after things cooled down. (Respondent 5, 2020)

6.5.2 Team Behaviour: Strong Team Culture

Teams that fared well under the strain of the extreme context seemed to already have a strong culture in place as a team prior to experiencing the change in their environment. A strong company culture built around solid firm values and clear team expectations was a corner stone for numerous participants when questioned about keeping their teams focused and motivated during this challenging time.

As a team we already had quite a good team structure and team unity, so to carry that forward and to empower the team members to become teachers towards each other and also as we would grow as a team, to help them transferring their skills to new guys and just opening new buildings and having a lot of fun with it. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Linking up occurs when interdependent agents have enough common perspective, such as a mutual desire for change, a common technological view, or shared identity and/or values, to link up (i.e., combine ideas and efforts) in ways that trigger novelty and amplify emergence (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). This behaviour was evident across the participants as many leaders utilised this changing and uncertain environment in which their teams were operating within as the catalyst to bring everyone together.

Right from the beginning, that everyone from the tea lady to the CEO was like 'We are in this together.' There was no... ja, it was all just as one. (Respondent 1, 2020)

So, the people that answered the rally cry got excited and it was okay cool, we are all going to do this. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Leaders also made reference to leading by example as best as they possibly could, specifically making reference to the impact seeing executive leadership stepping into roles that previously they wouldn't have assumed to help out. These leaders were bringing an energy and enthusiasm that operational leaders bring to ideas in order to get a firm to act on them, known as executing (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

I really enjoyed that I think our leadership, my senior managers and senior team, they really get stuck in, and I think that really sets the tone for the rest of the team in terms of expectations. It is not as if they just like tell us to get stuck in, they are in the thick of it as well, and those oaks worked extremely, extremely hard. (Respondent 11, 2020)

6.5.3 People Management: Human Capital Management

When faced with an extreme context, team members will face physical, emotional, psychological and material threats. Managers made reference to these threats and the response behaviour their teams used to counter those threats across every interview.

In states of change where there is a lack of certainty, you can't predict what the future will be, you are unsure about personal wellbeing, personal financial wellbeing, colleagues you work with daily and obviously have relationships with – for them – what it does in the brain is it creates a threat state, so people are always on edge, and a ripple effect of that is they are always trying to prove their worth, show their value, show up, be exceptional and it's go, go, go and it's a million miles an hour kind of execution. (Respondent 3, 2020)

These additional threats within the system required participants to actively manage their team's human capital resources, changing the way they engaged with their teams, instituting new resource management systems (referenced above) and being cognisant of the team as individual agents as opposed to taking a broader view of the necessary tasks that require completion.

'Listen, I can hear you are not in it at the moment, I can hear you're struggling' and obviously you have to look at the context, like if you know the guy has been doing 12 hour shifts for the last three weeks, then acknowledge that and put on the brakes on it there and then, because you are only going to lose if you keep loading the truck, because you are not going to get. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Nichols, Hayden & Trendler (2020) have suggested that leaders facing challenging environments align their team's focus, monitoring and managing performance in order to create a culture of accountability. The empathetic approach evident within the data creates the required accountability while being cognisant of the pressure being experienced by the team member.

Mental and physical health and wellbeing of both the managers themselves and their team members was a major focal area for the managers when discussing how to successfully facilitate positive team engagement within an extreme context.

I think it has just made it more forefront is this mental health wellbeing aspect, around burn-out, what is actually now acceptable in terms of productivity because as we move out of this phase three or into phase four, people's lives start to happen again and you can't expect them always to be by their laptop from 7 till 6, and I think it is really important to make sure that you are managing people's burn-out, your own burn-out. (Respondent 10, 2020)

6.5.4 Question 3: Analysis Summary

Baran and Scott (2010) stated that "groups within dangerous contexts must continually negotiate the ambiguous nature of their surroundings in an attempt to make sense of what is going on, what it means, and what the group should do next" (Baron and Scott, 2010, pp61). This behaviour is reflected in the way participants continue to engage with their teams, pushing 'collaboration', continued communication and group problem solving.

Furthermore, and as proposed by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), Complexity Leadership Theory focuses on the enabling behaviour required by leadership to drive organisational effectiveness and ultimately aid a firm in learning, creating and adapting within a complex adaptive system. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), adaptive space is a condition that enables networked interactions through the removal of bureaucracy, the opening up of formal and informal information flow channels, and the acceptance that adaptability lies within the interconnectivity of a networked system and the agents operating within that system.

Analysis of the participants' behavioural leadership responses within extreme contexts to ensure teams operate successfully aligns with the Complexity Leadership Theory framework presented by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017). Evidenced by the data presented in Chapter 5 is the intertwined usage of leadership behaviours from the participants that align to the entrepreneurial, operational and enabling styles highlighted within the Complexity Leadership Theory framework.

Additionally, while the unlikelihood of individual leaders within a firm successfully utilising all three leadership styles has been highlighted by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), the

qualitative data collected suggests that within an extreme context and facing a dynamic environment, leaders are more likely to make use of a number of these leadership styles to maintain their team effectiveness, further highlighting that changing environmental context requires changing leadership approaches (Osborn et al, 2002). Rather than assuming an entrepreneurial, operational or enabling leadership style, it seems the participants made use of behaviours across the leadership style spectrum. This data suggests that dynamic and uncertain environments call for leaders to be able to dynamically assume different styles or utilise different elements of different styles simultaneously.

6.6 Research Question 4: Discussion of Results

How should leaders mentally make sense of the environment and ultimately retain personal leadership effectiveness while facing an extreme context?

Question 4 of this research project attempted to explore what actions leaders utilised personally to manage themselves, their own feelings and experiences and effectively ensure they remained focused on team success while leading within an extreme context. This research question is discussed below based on the focal area that arose within the review of the results.

6.6.1 Individual Behaviour: Adaptability

The ability to manage organisations “for efficiency and results while incorporating new knowledge about how to lead for adaptability” (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, p. 11) remains vital in the leading of a team within a complex and uncertain environment. Within the context of the events following the COVID-19 pandemic, firms have been required to adapt following an extreme environmental and market shift in order to remain successful and operational within a complex operating environment.

Participants within the research project were acutely aware of their need to shift, to adapt and to pursue change as individual agents within the system as well as within their leadership roles, consistently referencing adaptability as a key focal area or individual trait.

I needed to adapt, I think everyone needed to adapt the way that they were managing. (Respondent 4, 2020)

In terms of my leadership it has been the same, but I have had to pick up some traits and I think adaptability has been one of the biggest ones. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Participants, while facing this extreme context, were constantly reflecting on the need to shift their thinking and explore new possible paradigms, pushing themselves towards adaptation.

How do I shift? Okay, I have to work in a new team – stay positive, adapt, work with that person. Okay, this is your new role, how do you stay positive and work in it and adapt. Okay, I am not quite sure how to frame that, let me ask someone who can help me frame it in a way where my leadership and positivity keeps going but I can adapt on certain aspects to that. (Respondent 6, 2020)

When questioned on how an individual pursues individual adaptation, the participants made reference to constantly being open to change, to wanting to grow as individuals and leaders and ultimately remaining positive when facing these continued challenges. Furthermore, specific reference was made to assuming a growth mindset within the environment (Setili, 2018), remaining positive and finding the opportunity within the challenges.

Look, one of the things we try and tell our clients are a lot of the things I have tried to embody and display, is Grow mindset principles, is with rapid amounts of change and with any change – whether foreseen or unforeseen – comes growth and opportunity to grow exponentially. And I think for me I have always tried to look at this as how can it help me improve and what can I learn from it and what can I take to get exponentially better? (Respondent 3, 2020)

This growth mindset was further demonstrated as many participants were required to assume new roles within their firms, forcing them into 'sink or swim' situations in which they were required to adapt or fail.

I was like 'Oh shit, this is a new domain I am stepping into, I also knew nothing about sales, it was a new domain I was stepping into and I thought well you know what I better wait to learn and actually doing it.' So, I had taken that approach and that was my personal decision. (Respondent 2, 2020)

6.6.2 Individual Behaviour: Control and Release

As highlighted by Randhawa, Wilden and West (2019), middle management fulfils the role of boundary-spanning agents across the strategic and operational intersection of their firm's approach. Within this role and facing an extreme context, the participants made specific reference to a leadership duality that ultimately required them to intertwine both a controlled and released leadership approach.

What I tried to do was try to give people some level of autonomy, because when you are in states of change most leaders unconsciously micro-manage and want to control, but in actual fact that further perpetuates the threat state you are driving then, because when you micromanage and control, people feel like you don't trust them to deliver on or execute the task that they are required to do. So, within the autonomy we just need to figure out what are the expectations of what good and bad is, or good and not so good, and how can we support one another to be as good as possible shall I say? (Respondent 3, 2020)

As the information flow and networked connections across the firm was measured, so too was the autonomy the leaders granted their teams. This duality of control allowed the participants the ability to manage the autonomous ideation and iteration to challenges being conducted by their teams while simultaneously allowing the participants to return order to the system should they feel the system was becoming inefficient.

Because if you give too much autonomy as I say there is mess and clutter, and we don't achieve the goal. So, it is just that kind of fine tuning, because I want everyone to believe in the approach and to buy into it, and then relentlessly pursue it. (Respondent 2, 2020)

I think personally is that once again, with change, there becomes a lot of ambiguity and a lot of fluffiness in the system, and once again we need to come together and re-align, re-purpose and really focus on what is the common ground that we all have in relation to achieving our goals. (Respondent 3, 2020)

Furthermore, participants made specific reference to the difference between the ordered firm and adaptive firm response, describing how the constricting of a system would create additional pressure within the system and not free up the systems agents to do what was required. Leaders were required to allow their teams to make decisions by empowering them to do so while continuing to remain aware of what was happening across the organisation.

In states of change where there is a lack of certainty, you can't predict what the future will be, you are unsure about personal wellbeing, personal financial wellbeing, colleagues you work with daily and obviously have relationships with – for them – what it does in the brain is it creates a threat state, so people are always on edge, and a ripple effect of that is they are always trying to prove their worth, show their value, show up, be exceptional and it's go, go, go and it's a million miles an hour kind of execution. (Respondent 3, 2020)

This reference supports the existing literature surrounding a firm's ordered response that details systems, confronted by complexity, seeking greater accountability, additional efficiency and additional risk mitigation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) in an attempt to gain control of the system and the environment. An adaptive response, however, seeks to utilise the collective intelligence of networked groups in order to enable firm adaptability to challenges (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

This control and release response, evidenced within the research sample, seems to provide a middle ground between the approaches highlighted by Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017), suggesting that when facing an extreme context, a dual methodology that seeks to both provide the flexibility and autonomy to the team while continuing to create more control when necessary may be the correct approach. This dynamic approach aligns to the findings of Anderson (1999), stating that a dynamic system moves forward as the agents learn and adapt their approaches within the system and adjust their responses as required (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009).

6.6.3 Individual Behaviour: Self-Empathy

Research participants within the project referenced being required to be both supportive and caring towards their team while simultaneously managing the flow of information across the business and focusing on ensuring their firm maintained operational efficiency. Additionally, participants made reference to being placed under tremendous stress, working longer hours and at a more intensive pace than ever before, required to go beyond what would've been considered acceptable outside of an extreme context.

Personally, I got to a point where I worked myself into a hole, and there was actually a proposal that we submitted that I had completely blown out, I messed it up, and the whole team had to work like 24 hours just to fix my mistake. (Respondent 2, 2020)

It was like 'I am just tired – I didn't go running tired, I can feel I am emotionally drained.' (Respondent 3, 2020)

While experiencing these numerous forces within an extreme context, participants referenced that an element of self-care and self-empathy had been required but had often been neglected. While the participants were aware that they were required to set an example and to practice self-care:

You have got to manage that, we have learnt, and it is something I am trying to manage myself and with my team is to have that 'shut the laptop' time, whenever it is, whenever it is in your day, I think it is managing against output as opposed to hours is the important thing now. (Respondent 2, 2020)

I think I tell a lot of people this, that the best analogy ever is the aeroplane ones that you can't help, they always say put the mask on yourself first because you can't help anyone if you can't help yourself. (Respondent 6, 2020)

Research participants were actively managing their teams, demonstrating both empathy and compassion for those members while simultaneously neglecting themselves, which according to a few participants, resulted in poor work output, bad decisions and missed opportunities.

Like keen, get my teeth stuck in, work, work, work, work – 'doof' – fall over. Too much. (Respondent 2, 2020)

6.6.4 Individual Behaviour: Knowledge Sharing

Baran and Scott (2010) suggested that "leadership necessarily involves all members of the organisation with respect to their roles and the context in which they operate" (p. 65). Within changing context's however, leadership is simultaneously required to change and adapt accordingly (Osborn, Hunt and Jauch, 2002). The participants within this project were self-aware enough to understand that given the complexity within the system, they did not possess the knowledge or capacity to be able to know everything.

Because honestly, no one knows! Like so much of what we have done, we just made up. And just like talking to each other, trying to find ideas, and whatever happened from within my team for example, it is not just me, I spoke to a lot of people to try to get to the point where you decide 'Is this the right thing?' And to also help them understand that that is the process that the company is going through, that everyone is just trying to talk to each other and find a solution, and that really did help with the change management. (Respondent 9, 2020)

This led leaders to seek answers across their teams, within their executives, from colleagues and in some cases across international markets in an attempt to share knowledge and further develop their understanding of the extreme context in which they were operating.

One of the other things was around knowledge share because we are a consulting company, and the market is evolving very fast, and as well – even linked to COVID – I mean one of the directors in like Nairobi, he was like the head of the COVID resource workshops and supporting clients. So, he was actually doing like how can clients manage their portfolio companies to manage COVID. So, they had done a lot of research so there was all around like these knowledge share platforms, so everyone was still able to share information, still keep connected. (Respondent 10, 2020)

Buchanan and Moore (2016) and Jacobsson and Hallgren (2016) have stated that the traditional dualities of leadership (leaders versus followers and individual versus dispersed leadership) have been replaced with a collective approach that better captures the realities of leadership within extreme contexts (Buchanan & Hallgren, 2019). The data gathered supports this notion, demonstrating specific references of the participants seeking and sharing knowledge on a larger scale than they had previously done, suggesting that when facing an extreme context, these participants found it necessary to broaden their networks in an attempt to gain further knowledge through which they could better adapt to the challenges they faced.

And again, that took me to bounce ideas off certain people. So say ‘Look, what do I do here? What is your suggestion?’ And specifically that we work together well. And then guys from leadership roles, I asked again ‘What are your thoughts?’ (Respondent 6, 2020)

Also, again, working with many other teams, outside of our region, so outside of SA we would go to the UAE, to EMEA, to all of these guys to find more information. So, it is like the hive mind expanded during all of this. (Respondent 7, 2020)

6.6.5 Individual Behaviour: Perspective and Positivity

Sorokin (1943) has demonstrated that when facing an extreme context, members of a group can become so overly stimulated and emotional that their ability to process information and make the correct decisions will become negatively impacted. This notion, further supported by the research participants who made mention of poor decisions, producing work below standard and general concern for the enthusiasm and drive within their teams, was of serious concern to the middle management leaders.

Personally, I got to a point where I worked myself into a hole, and there was actually a proposal that we submitted that I had completely blown out, I messed it up, and the whole team had to work like 24 hours just to fix my mistake. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Additionally, the research participants made specific reference to having needed to remain the energy and lifeblood of their team, encouraging positivity and energy into their teams who at times struggled, having burnt themselves out or felt overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the extreme context.

I think that is part of our business, there has been so much change, so many ups and downs, but if you stay positive and adapt and change you can get through it, you can move forward. (Respondent 6, 2020)

And be energetic and think positive about that you know? We can talk about all the other shit in this world, but I refuse to talk about that; we kind of lock on to that thing and it seems like it keeps us going. (Respondent 9, 2020)

Gratitude and perspective were referenced as the attributes that allowed the participants to remain focused and connected to what needed to be done, while simultaneously balancing their own individual and personal stressors. Furthermore, numerous participants referenced the strong personal support structures that enabled the leaders to gain perspective as individual agents within the extreme context as well as being leaders in the system.

I mean it has been a ... personally it has been a massive time for introspection for me. And I was an incredibly career-driven person, and I have become softer through this. I have realised that family and going through a patch where you are not able to see your family, where it was actually illegal to go and see your family, really affected me! (Respondent 3, 2020)

And I realised reflecting, that it has been like a good three or so years where I have just had the blinkers on and have completely disregarded those things, that make me a better person in the office: I have lost out on family, I haven't done the things that fill my soul as much as I would have liked to, and I now am realising that there needs to be a balance. (Respondent 2, 2020)

Additionally, a sense of continually looking for opportunity within the challenges they faced was a prevalent strategy utilized by the participants who focused on the short-term tactical approach of the business and what needed to be done in the short term, on almost a daily basis, to position their firms in the best way that day.

So it has made me more alert, made me appreciate a lot more of what I have got, and I think that has filtered through in my behaviour and my interactions with people professionally and personally, and ja, being more deliberate. (Respondent 9, 2020)

Ultimately, there seemed to be a specific focus on the 'silver lining' from the middle managers questioned about adapting and overcoming no matter the obstacle. The participants had come through this difficult period focused on their teams and their firms, focused on surviving this difficult period and triumphing. A particular highlight of an interview was listening to one particular respondent talk about running team quizzes online, cooking classes or 'open mic nights' for his team, dress up drinks via teleconference and a host of other fun ways through which the participant felt he could carry the spirits of his team.

I adapted my leadership style, which is always kind of keep the positivity and I just adapted it to a lockdown situation which as best as possible, I could – whether it was a Zoom quiz, whether it was organising teams of 30 Seconds, and somehow making 30 Seconds work online with 20 people, all dialling in, shouting across and having drinks on a Friday – just to make that happen, and keeping the spirits up in a time where you had all this stress and negativity and people reporting on deaths happening. (Respondent 6, 2020)

6.6.6 Question 4: Analysis Summary

The leadership response behaviours highlighted by the participants when asked how to successfully manage their teams facing an extreme context aligned to the various responses received surrounding the self-focussed behaviours required to adequately manage themselves within that same extreme context. While leaders were aware of what was required to navigate, sense make and sense give for their own teams though, a disconnect seemed to exist between the way in which leaders managed their teams and the way in which they managed themselves. Leaders seemed very quick to give too much of themselves to their teams or their firms without being cautious about managing their own energy.

There is little doubt, based on the feedback received from the participants, that their experiences within the extreme context caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the paradigm shifts required within their businesses and how they lead their teams has had a dramatic impact on them. The uncertainty, volatility and increasing complexity within the system has required them to shift their responses as leaders and as individuals,

requiring them to adapt to an ever changing and highly dynamic set of variables. As an example, leaders within the participant group made reference to assuming a more human-centric leadership style approach, citing a relational approach over a task focussed one. These same leaders however seemed to ignore this approach when attempting to manage themselves, remaining task focused and pushing themselves to deliver on the various tasks required, often overextending themselves.

Additionally, we have continued to see references from the participants to a required complexity leadership approach, with reference to knowledge sharing (linking up), adaptable behaviour (initiating, iterating and continuous learning) and an adaptive response to complexity within the system from a personal perspective (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). These findings support existing leadership research to date surrounding the complexity leadership framework proposed by Uhl-Bien & Arena (2017).

6.7 Conclusion

Chapter 6 provided an analysis and further discussion of the results presented in Chapter 5 of this research report. It focussed on framing the data gathered across the semi-structured interviews in alignment with the research questions proposed in Chapter 3, comparing and contrasting the participants feedback and discussing links between the existing Complexity Leadership Theory literature and the data gathered surrounding leadership within an extreme context.

The presented evidence, aligned to the existing literature, demonstrates a requirement from leaders to adapt their leadership style and approach based on the context within which they are leading. This leadership style and approach shift from the participants evolved from an operationally focussed style to an entrepreneurial focused style and back again based on the context the leaders faced. Additionally, a shift in the leader's approach to managing their team aligned to their change in style with participants assuming a more task- or people-centred approach based on the context in which they were operating.

Furthermore, leaders made it clear, based on the data gathered, that their teams required active management when facing an extreme event with a specific focus on the leadership styles presented by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) and the various behaviours attributed to those styles. Key within this chapter was the realisation from the leaders within the sample that while their focus had been on managing their team and the businesses shifts

required from them while facing an extreme event, they had, in part, neglected to manage themselves.

Chapter 7 will seek to outline the key conclusions of this research proposal and highlight the contribution to both the academic literature and the practical application of Complexity Leadership Theory when facing an extreme context. Additionally, it will make recommendations based on the findings of this report.

7 CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 discusses the conclusions and recommendations following the analysis of the leadership literature undertaken and the data gathered from the research participants facing an extreme context in an attempt to further understand how these leaders managed to and lead their teams effectively while facing the incredible challenges created by a shifting, uncertain and volatile environment.

The conclusions and recommendations provided herein are derived from the literature review undertaken in Chapter 2 and the subsequent presentation and analysis of the data in Chapters 5 and 6. Based on these findings, the recommendations are made in an attempt to make meaningful contribution to the theoretical understanding of Complexity Leadership Theory and simultaneously make a meaningful contribution to the practical understanding of managing and leading teams when facing an extreme context. Additionally, this chapter will highlight potential avenues for further research in an attempt to push Complexity Leadership Theory forward.

7.2 Research Implications and Recommendations

This research report aimed to explore the leadership response to an extreme context by leaders at the middle management level in order to understand the responses required at an individual and leadership level from these managers to balance the strategic and operational requirements of their firms.

Feedback from the participants within this research report was largely concentrated around the leader's ability to make sense of the information in the system, to assimilate that information as required and sense give back to their team. Leaders were required to continue to communicate and engage with their team as much as possible while ensuring they provided their team with the autonomy necessary to operate within the environment as required. Additionally, leaders were required to shift between a task- and people-focused leadership approach based on the context in which they are operating to ensure they get the best out of their teams. This shift saw leaders soften their leadership approach, assuming a more people-centric focus over a task focused one and focussing on the individual needs of each team member in an authentic and open way, making a cognitive decision to connect deeply with their team members and understand, at a human level, the challenges these team members faced across their

personal and professional lives. While the data gathered from the participants within this research project echo the sentiments expressed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) regarding enabling leadership, the additional response factors surrounding the approach based on the context in which the participants were leading remains incredibly important. Osborn et al. (2002) postulated that effective leadership is inherently tied to context and that a change in context should create a change in leadership. This change in context needs to be reflected in the Complexity Leadership Theory framework.

With the above in mind, the researcher recommends that the Complexity Leadership Theory framework proposed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) be updated to demonstrate that within an extreme context, leaders, regardless of whether they are entrepreneurial, operational or enabling leadership focused, are required to also consider their leadership approach with a specific focus on task- or people-centric leadership. This oscillation between a task- or people-focussed approach is an additional consideration not accounted for within the Complexity Leadership Theory Framework that requires inclusion to best serve leaders facing uncertain, changing or extreme contexts.

Further evident within this research report is the highlighted link between the existing literature surrounding Complexity Leadership Theory presented in Chapter 2 and the data presented in Chapter 5 emphasising the continuous shift between Complexity Leadership Theory leadership styles predicated on the participants short- or long-term focus. The participants within the research project shifted their leadership styles in accordance with their focus and while balancing the strategic and operational requirements from their businesses. Furthermore, as highlighted by the shift within their approach to leadership (task- vs people- centric) and supported by the shift in their leadership styles (entrepreneurial, operational and enabling), it becomes clear that a more dynamic view of leadership from an approach and style perspective is required when facing a dynamic, complex and extreme context. This reinforces the various statements made by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016; 2018) demonstrating that complex environments require complex leadership approaches, essentially requiring leaders to match complexity with complexity.

Another finding from the research report was the discovery that the participants' behavioural leadership responses within their environments to ensure teams operated successfully aligned with the Complexity Leadership Theory framework presented by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017). Evidenced by the data presented in Chapter 5 is the intertwined usage of leadership behaviours from the participants that support the

entrepreneurial, operational and enabling styles highlighted within the Complexity Leadership Theory framework. Additionally, while the unlikelihood of individual leaders within a firm successfully utilising all three leadership styles has been highlighted by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), the qualitative data collected suggests that within an extreme context and facing a dynamic environment, leaders are more likely to make use of a number of these leadership styles to maintain their team effectiveness, further highlighting that changing environmental context requires changing leadership approaches (Osborn et al, 2002).

Rather than assuming an entrepreneurial, operational or enabling leadership style, it seems the participants within this research report made use of behaviours across the leadership style spectrum. This data suggests that challenging and uncertain environments call for leaders to be able to dynamically assume different styles or utilise different elements of different styles simultaneously. The recommendation, based on these findings is that the Complexity Leadership Theory framework be amended to demonstrate that when facing an extreme context, leaders are able to utilise ALL of the leadership styles highlighted by the framework as opposed to assuming the behaviour of just one style and shifting as required. Rather than viewing the framework as a spectrum of behaviours through which a leader needs to move up and down, the framework should be reworked in an attempt to demonstrate the ability for leaders to select the relevant behaviours required based on context, making use of behaviours across the different styles simultaneously.

Finally, focused specifically on the middle managers as individual agents who were both leading and experiencing the extreme context concurrently, there is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic and the paradigm shifts required has had a dramatic impact on them. The uncertainty, volatility and increasing complexity within the system has required these managers to shift their responses as leaders and as individuals, requiring them to adapt to an ever changing and highly dynamic set of variables. The leadership response behaviours highlighted by the participants when asked how to successfully manage their teams facing an extreme context aligned to the various responses received surrounding the self-focussed behaviours required to adequately manage themselves within that same extreme context. While leaders were aware of what was required to navigate, sense make and sense give for their own teams though, a disconnect seemed to exist between the way in which leaders managed their teams and the way in which they managed themselves.

Leaders were very quick to give too much of themselves to their teams or their firms without being cautious about managing their own energy. While leaders interviewed seemed to manage their teams well, a number of the managers did so at personal expense to their mental and physical well-being. In the long term, the ability of middle managers adequately managing themselves to ensure they can give of their best to their firms will have long term benefits to firms, outside of the extreme context research window.

7.3 Contribution of The Study

7.3.1 Theoretical Contribution

The qualitative data gathered within this research report suggests that the framework proposed by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) referencing leaders assuming an entrepreneurial, operational or enabling style of leadership requires amendment. The data suggests that complex and uncertain environments call for leaders to be able to dynamically assume different styles or employ different elements of different styles simultaneously.

This contribution highlights that while the various leadership styles referenced by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2016) and their corresponding behaviours align to those discovered by this research report, the assumption that leaders are required to shift between styles may be incorrect and that potentially leaders may make use of the various styles in combination with each other based on the context in which they operate.

7.3.2 Practical Implications

In practice, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged businesses and leaders globally. The increased complexity within the operating environment combined with the personal stress and strain experienced the world over has shifted the global view on business and leadership as people attempt to operate in an environment vastly different from the operating environment they were accustomed too. This change has required adaptation at a rate faster than perhaps many were accustomed, and this adaptation requires management.

The contribution made by the researcher attempts to provide middle managers facing an extreme context, like the one created by the COVID-19 pandemic, an amended Complexity Leadership Theory framework that takes into account not only the leaders need to be dynamic in their leadership style to match a shifting environment but

simultaneously takes into account a leader's need to be dynamic in their approach to their team. The ability to shift leadership styles (entrepreneurial, operational and enabling leadership) and the ability to simultaneously shift their approach (task- or people-centric) will stand leaders in good stead to face continued shifts in their environment and ultimately produce more successful results for leaders and for their firms.

7.4 Limitations of The Study

Given the qualitative nature of this research report and ultimately its attempt to dive deeper into the lived experiences of the participants' experience of an extreme context, its findings are not statistically generalisable and therefore a major limitation.

That said however, some additional limitations of the report have been highlighted below in an attempt by the researcher to provide learnings delivered by hindsight:

1. As raised within the report itself, a major limitation of this study was the ability of the researcher to understand whether the leadership behaviours identified by the participants were in fact successful or merely portrayed (or viewed as such) by the participants.
2. While the event (Covid-19 Pandemic) provided a good baseline to get a view from different participants across a variety of sectors who experienced a mass extreme event simultaneously, everything within the study remained constrained by the COVID-19/lockdown focused.
3. Finally, given that currently the world is still reeling from and dealing with COVID-19 and the second waves sweeping across the globe with additional lockdowns currently (as of writing this) underway, it would be naïve to think of this experience as being over or past. There is no doubt that this extreme context will continue and therefore this fluid and compelling adaptation will continue. In addition, the experience of how leaders' experience change will be prolonged and will, indeed, alter the participants' view.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future recommendations for research within the specific area surrounding Complexity Leadership Theory and the required leadership response when facing an extreme context could delve into the below topics:

1. A geographically focused study outside of South Africa to understand whether a similar leadership response was utilised. This geographical study could also be conducted on an international scale in order to understand the broader leadership response globally to this extreme context.
2. A gender focused study concentrated on the response to an extreme context and the leadership responses required to manage a team – did responses differ across genders?
3. A longitudinal approach could be taken on firms over time to understand if the identified ‘successful’ leadership responses to managing within the extreme context were in fact successful.

Additionally, further research could be undertaken as below within the Complexity Leadership Theory development:

1. Exploration of the finding and recommendations of this research report in order to identify whether the recommended amendments to the Complexity Leadership Theory framework could be considered outside of the extreme context environment.
2. An overlay of Transactional and Transformational Leadership with Complexity Leadership in order to understand the style and approach dynamic
3. Complexity Leadership Theory and its use within the Corporate Turnaround space
4. The link between Leadership Ambidexterity, Dynamic Capabilities and Complexity Leadership Theory

7.6 Conclusion

The work postulated and developed over the past 20 years surrounding Complexity Leadership Theory and the frameworks established and evolved by seminal authors such as Uhl-Bien, Arena, Marion and McKelvey have progressed our understanding about leadership as a dynamic action that requires constant adjustment based on the highly complex and dynamic environment in which we operate. Ultimately, the ability to create the adaptive space required to provide an environment in which adaptation can flourish, falls on leaders throughout the organisation.

It was Heraclitus who said, “the only thing that is constant is change” (Thallemer, 2020) and as leaders facing a more dynamic, volatile, uncertain and unknown world, we need to be ready to embrace change. Now, more than ever before, as complexity within systems grows exponentially, we require leaders who are equipped to deal with the complexity they face by using adaptive leadership responses to challenges in order to successfully steer their firms towards adaptive change.

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9 APPENDIX

9.1 Appendix 1: Ethical Clearance Letter

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance
Approved**

Dear Ryan Jans,

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.


You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS
Research Admin team.

 **EthicalClearanceReport.pdf**
413K

9.2 Appendix 2: Sample Informed Consent Letter

Respondent Number:

Respondent Job Title:

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science and completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA.

I am conducting research on the leadership response utilised by middle management in reply to an extreme context.

Our interview is expected to last about 60 minutes and will help me explore, in depth and at an individual level, the experience of middle managers in response to an extreme context.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Your participation is anonymous and only aggregated data will be reported. By completing the survey, you indicate that you voluntarily participate in this research. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me.

Our details are provided below:

Researcher Name:

Supervisor:

Email:

Email:

Phone:

Phone:

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

9.3 Appendix 3: Final Interview Guide

Introduction

Broad introduction to be provided to the Interviewee regarding both the topic and the overall problem to be addressed by the Researcher:

1. Introduction of the purpose of the study.
2. Researcher to discuss the interview channel method (Zoom Software) and the reason the interview is being conducted via Zoom call and attain permission to start recording the Zoom call.
3. Researcher to explain the methodology and how the data will be captured, analysed and reviewed.
4. Explain the requirement for the Informed Consent, explain confidentiality of the study, the anonymity of the Interviewee and attained signed consent to proceed with the interview.
5. Discuss timeframe for the interview (60 mins maximum) and explain that the discussion may have personal benefits to the Interviewee through the enhanced understanding of their own leadership behaviours, tactics and techniques

Management Experience and Background

Questions to focus on providing some background to the individual and to start building the necessary rapport with the Interviewee.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. Career to date
2. Professional Experience and Background
3. Professional Leadership Style
4. Current focus as a Manager
5. Strengths and Weaknesses as a Manager

Experience to Date – Overall Experience

Questions to focus on the following:

1. How are you doing?
2. What has the past 6 months been like for you as a leader and as an individual experiencing everything?
3. Has the experience over the past few months changed you as a leader and as a person?

Anchored Descriptions

Researcher to create three clear and specific phases within the mind of the Interviewee in order to anchor them specifically to those phases to successfully understand the leadership response used within each phase:

Phase 1 – Pre-Extreme Event

Phase 2 – During Event

Phase 3 – Post Event

Phase 1 – Pre-Extreme Event

We're going to focus a little on life as a leader prior to the pandemic. Please think back to how life and business operated prior to March 2020.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. What was it like to be a manager and to lead a team during this period?
2. Are there any specific behaviours or actions you explicitly remember being part of the way you led your team?
3. How did you feel about your team's performance in this period? Did it run like clockwork, was it a well-oiled machine?
4. If you had to sum up your own thoughts, experiences, feelings and headspace about your leadership style during this period using three key words, what would those words be?

Phase 2 – During Event

It was almost as if someone hit the pause button. Suddenly, we were instructed to shelter in place, were asked to work from home and obey legislative curfews. Life changed almost instantly.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. What was it like to be a part of the business during this period?
2. What was it like to be a manager and to lead a team during this period? Are there any specific instances or examples that further illustrate these experiences?
3. Did your business have to adapt or change the way in which they operated at all? Why? In what way? And how was this accomplished?
4. Are there any specific behaviours or actions you explicitly remember being different in the way you managed and led your team?

5. If you had to sum up your own thoughts, experiences, feelings and headspace about your leadership style during this period using three key words, what would those words be?

Phase 3 – Post-Extreme Event: The New Normal

As businesses returned to the office and the levels of restrictions eased, it became very clear that life as we knew it prior to the global pandemic would be different. Everyone was calling it the new normal.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. What is it like to be a manager and to lead a team in this new world? Are there any specific instances or examples that further illustrate these experiences?
2. Are there any specific behaviours or actions you explicitly remember being different in the way you managed and led your team previously compared to now?
3. If you made changes as a business to continue to operate, what has happened subsequently?
4. In hindsight as a leader, would you change anything about the way you manage both yourself and the team previously to set yourself up for success in this new world?
5. If you had to sum up your own thoughts, experiences, feelings and headspace during this period using three key words, what would those words be?

Looking Back

It's often said that hindsight is an exact science. Looking back on the various challenges you've faced personally and professionally within the business and the changing environment, let's talk a little bit with a broader view across all three periods:

Questions to focus on the following:

1. If you had to describe your approach to leading throughout these three distinctive phases, would you say your leadership approach changed as the various challenges changed?
2. As the business faced the challenges it did, were you required to adapt to survive? Were there any obvious blockers to success and if so, how did you overcome them?
3. You've come through this unbelievably challenging period. What would you say has contributed to that success? How have you managed to remain focused, keep your teams focussed and continue to deliver the results the business required while the business and the world was changing around you? How?

Further Comments or Questions

Ask Interviewee if there are any additional comments, they would like to make based on the interview and additionally if they have any additional questions at all following the interview.

9.4 Appendix 4: Pilot Interview – Interview Guide

Introduction

Broad introduction to be provided to the Interviewee regarding both the topic and the overall problem to be addressed by the Researcher:

1. Introduction of Interviewee and their role.
2. Researcher to discuss the interview channel method (Zoom Software) and the reason the interview is being conducted via Zoom call and attain permission to start recording the Zoom call.
3. Researcher to introduce the purpose of the study, explain the methodology and how the data will be captured, analysed and reviewed.
4. Explain the requirement for the Informed Consent, explain confidentiality of the study, the anonymity of the Interviewee and attained signed consent to proceed with the interview.
5. Discuss timeframe for the interview (90 mins maximum) and explain that the discussion may have personal benefits to the Interviewee through the enhanced understanding of their own leadership behaviours, tactics and techniques

Management Experience and Background

Questions to focus on providing some background to the individual and to start building the necessary rapport with the Interviewee.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. Career to date
2. Educational Background
3. Professional Experience and Background
4. Personal and Professional Leadership Style Description
5. Drivers and Motivations surrounding current role.
6. Current focus as a Manager
7. Strengths and Weaknesses as a Manager

Experience to Date – Overall Experience

“The past 6 months globally and locally have no doubt seen us all face testing times. Why don’t you tell me a little about your experience to date? It must have been incredibly challenging.”

Questions to focus on the following:

1. How are you doing?
2. Has the experience over the past few months changed you as a leader and as a person?
3. Overall, what would you say the key learnings have been throughout this disruptive and uncertain period within the business for you personally as a leader?

Anchored Descriptions

Researcher to create three clear and specific phases within the mind of the Interviewee in order to anchor them specifically to those phases to successfully understand the leadership behaviours, tactics or techniques used within each phase:

Phase 1 – Pre-Radical Change

We're going to focus a little on life prior to the pandemic and the required changes your business was forced to make because of radical change.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. What was it like to be a part of the business during this period?
2. What was it like to be a manager and to lead a team during this period? Are there any specific instances or examples that further illustrate these experiences?
3. Are there any specific behaviours or actions you explicitly remember being different in the way you managed and led your team?
4. How did you feel about the business, about your team's performance, about your performance and about the future of the business during this period?
5. In hindsight as a leader, would you change anything about the way you managed both yourself and the team during this period?
6. If you had to sum up your own thoughts, experiences, feelings and headspace during this period using five key words, what would those words be?

Phase 2 – During Radical Change

It was almost as if someone hit the pause button. Suddenly, we were instructed to shelter in place, were asked to work from home and obey legislative curfews. Life changed almost instantly.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. What was it like to be a part of the business during this period?

2. What was it like to be a manager and to lead a team during this period? Are there any specific instances or examples that further illustrate these experiences?
3. Are there any specific behaviours or actions you explicitly remember being different in the way you managed and led your team?
4. How did you feel about the business, about your team's performance, about your performance and about the future of the business during this period?
5. In hindsight as a leader, would you change anything about the way you managed both yourself and the team during this period?
6. If you had to sum up your own thoughts, experiences, feelings and headspace during this period using five key words, what would those words be?

Phase 3 – Post-Radical Change: The New Normal

As businesses returned to the office and the levels of restrictions eased, it became very clear that life as we knew it prior to the global pandemic would be different. Everyone was calling it the new normal.

Questions to focus on the following:

1. What was it like to be a part of the business during this period?
2. What was it like to be a manager and to lead a team during this period? Are there any specific instances or examples that further illustrate these experiences?
3. Are there any specific behaviours or actions you explicitly remember being different in the way you managed and led your team?
4. How did you feel about the business, about your team's performance, about your performance and about the future of the business during this period?
5. In hindsight as a leader, would you change anything about the way you manage both yourself and the team during this period?
6. If you had to sum up your own thoughts, experiences, feelings and headspace during this period using five key words, what would those words be?

Looking Back

It's often said that hindsight is an exact science. Looking back on the various challenges you've faced personally within the business and the changing environment, let's talk a little bit with a broader view across all three periods:

Questions to focus on the following:

1. If you had to describe your approach to leading throughout these three distinct phases, would you say your leadership style or approach changed as the various challenges changed?
2. Over the period, what would you say your biggest frustration as a leader was over the past 6 months? With a seat at the C-Suite executive table throughout these periods, what would you have done differently?
3. You've come through this unbelievably challenging period. What would you say has contributed to that success? How have you managed to remain focused, keep your teams focussed and continue to deliver the results the business required while the business and the world was changing around you?

Further Comments or Questions

Ask Interviewee if there are any additional comments, they would like to make based on the interview and additionally if they have any additional questions at all following the interview.

9.5 Appendix 5: Atlas TI Codes

0: Professional Background
0: Career to Date
0: Education Background
0: Current Role
0: Current Focus
0: Professional Leadership Style
0: Leadership Exposure
0: Management Exposure
0: Experience of Great Leaders
1: Leadership Response: Team Collaboration
1: Leadership Response: Team Efficiency
1: Leadership Response: Management of Team Resources
1: Leadership Response: Continuous Communication
1: Leadership Response: Consistent Leadership Behaviour
1: Leadership Response: Transparency and Honesty
1: Leadership Response: Information Filtering
1: Leadership Response: Managing Team Expectations
1: Leadership Response: Motivational Behaviour and Cheer Leading
1: Leadership Response: Dealing with Uncertainty
1: Leadership Response: Problem Solving (Environmental Challenges)
1: Leadership Response: Leadership Loneliness
1: Leadership Response: Sense Making (Uncertainty)
1: Leadership Response: Empathetic Leader Response
1: Leadership Response: Personal/Professional Boundaries
1: Leadership Response: Conscious Leadership Changes
1: Leadership Response: Continued Learning
1: Leadership Response: Flexible Response
1: Leadership Response: Leader Calmness
1: Leadership Response: Encouraging Team Autonomy

1: Leadership Response: Inspirational Behaviour
1: Leadership Response: Implementation Focus
1: Leadership Response: Leading By Example
1: Leadership Response: Task Focused (Hard Response)
1: Leadership Response: Leadership Micromanagement
1: Leadership Response: Individual Focus and Personal Skills
1: Leadership Response: Individual Resilience
1: Leadership Response: Self Awareness
1: Leadership Response: People Focused (Soft Response)
2: Organisational Behaviour: Change Resistance
2: Organisational Behaviour: Long Term Strategy
2: Organisational Behaviour: System Awareness
2: Organisational Behaviour: Strategic Changes
2: Business Systems: Internal Politics
2: Business Systems: Partnering
2: Business Systems: Processes and Procedures
2: Business Systems: Technology
2: Business Systems: Change and Adaptation
2: Business Systems: Creativity
2: Business Systems: Creative Problem Solving
2: Organisational Behaviour: Operational Changes
2: Organisational Behaviour: Short Term Strategy
2: Leadership Behaviour: Continuous Change
2: Leadership Behaviour: Operational Aligning
2: Leadership Behaviour: Operational Execution
2: Organisational Behaviour: Empathy
3: People Management: Conflict Management
3: People Management: Human Capital Management
3: People Management: Stress Management
3: Team Behaviour: Individual Accountability
3: Team Behaviour: Client Accountability

3: Team Behaviour: Internal Collaboration
3: Team Behaviour: Ongoing Communication
3: Team Behaviour: Uncertainty
3: Team Behaviour: Decisive Action
3: Team Behaviour: Disengagement
3: Team Behaviour: Culture
4: Individual Management: Accountability
4: Individual Management: Adaptability
4: Individual Management: Burn Out
4: Individual Management: Corporate
4: Individual Management: Determination
4: Individual Management: Self Care
4: Individual Management: Entrepreneurial Leadership
4: Individual Management: Growth Mindset
4: Individual Management: Perspective
4: Individual Management: Positivity
4: Individual Management: Continued Routines
4: Individual Management: Generalist Background
4: Individual Management: Specialist Background

9.6 Appendix 6: Sample Non-Disclosure Agreement

It is a condition of engagement that students shall aid in preserving all confidential information, ideas and plans; any confidential information or any information in respect of any data gathered in respect of their research work. The parties under this agreement agree to the following:

1. The parties of this agreement shall use its best endeavours to keep any information confidential which it has acquired or may acquire pursuant to the research initiative. For the purposes of this clause, confidential information excludes information which:
 - 1.1. is publicly available or becomes publicly available through no act or default of any Party;
 - 1.2. was in the possession of a Party prior to its disclosure otherwise than as a result of a breach by any party of any obligation of confidentiality to which it is subject;
 - 1.3. is disclosed to the Student by a person which did not acquire the information under an obligation of confidentiality; and
 - 1.4. is independently acquired by a Student as a result of work carried out by a Person to whom no disclosure of such information has been made;
2. No Party shall use or disclose confidential information except with the prior written consent of GIBS or in accordance with an order of a court of competent jurisdiction or in order to comply with any law or governmental regulations by which any Party concerned is bound or as may be lawfully requested in writing by any Governmental Authority.
3. The Party undertakes to permanently delete any electronic copies of confidential information received and destroy any confidential printed documentation or similar material in their possession promptly once they are no longer required on completion of the contracted service by the Student.

4. On completion of the contracted service by the Student, the party is to confirm to the Student that they are not in possession of any confidential information.

Signed on behalf of _____

at _____ on the _____ day of

_____ 20_____.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Witness: _____